

“Freedom in Following Jesus”

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another,” so writes Paul in his letter to the Galatians. **Wow! How could anyone in their right mind say such a thing? “Called to freedom...” and then “become slaves to one another?”** What kind of freedom is that if you allow yourself to be someone else’s slave?

Well, he didn’t mean to literally become enslaved to another person, for he summed up his meaning with these words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Freedom is the hallmark of Christian existence. But this freedom is constantly threatened. For the Galatians it was threatened because they were succumbing to the blandishments of Paul’s opponents, which was essentially legalism. Paul understands that this completely undermines the gospel.

Freedom in Christ

For many people today, to suggest that a life committed to Christ is the truly free life seems doubtful if not preposterous. How can allowing my personal desires and choices be influenced or dictated by God be freedom; isn’t that rather a restriction on my individual freedom? I mean, doesn’t the Christian life take all the fun out of life? Doesn’t it expect me to give my time and money for church or “do-good” projects? How does that make me free?

To be fair, you’d have to pose a counter-question. Is my individual freedom, to do whatever I please true freedom? Or is it a bondage to something else?

“At the beginning of life we do not reconcile ourselves to the fact of sin. We take a rational view of life and say that a man by controlling his instincts, and by educating himself, can produce a life which will slowly evolve into the life of God. But as we go on, we find the presence of something which we have not taken into consideration, that is, sin, and it upsets all our calculations. Sin has made the basis of things wild and not rational. We have to recognize that sin is a fact, not a defect; sin is red-handed mutiny against God.”¹

It was sin, in fact, that crucified Jesus Christ and the same will be true in your life and mine. Our individual freedom without reference to God, is really a bondage to sin. If sin rules in my life, then God’s life in me will be killed. But thankfully, God has given us a way out, that is through Jesus, who rose from

¹Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, “Acquaintance With Grief, June 23rd,” (Oswald Chambers Publications Assoc., 1963).

death, overcoming the power of sin. When we find our life in Him, we are freed from the grip of sin and put on the path to genuine life. That is why Paul can say that true freedom is found in a life committed to Christ.

We won't ever discover the joy of salvation until we make the decision to follow Christ. I'm not talking about wearing yourself out with church programs, but about committing your life to Christ. Only there will you find full life and true freedom.

I don't know why so many are afraid to take the step to follow for only he offers what is good for you. Christ invites us to his fellowship to receive the grace that can set us free.

Freedom Vs. License

Paul consistently defends Christian freedom. Legalism can endanger freedom, so Paul clarifies its purpose and direction. He's explained the law's misuse, and how you can never experience and enjoy the love of the Father through laws and rituals. Now he attacks the other side of the problem and puts out fires caused by misdirected freedom.

Without God in our freedom easily degenerates into license; that is, we so easily slip into indulging our own preferences and desires. Without God to set a standard for living, what we consider to be a "good person" will easily be swayed by the spirit of the times, or the spirit of selfishness, rather than the Holy Spirit. When freedom is grasped without first recognizing a need for God, all sorts of problems abound. It can happen that a person has turned his/her life over to Christ, except some guarded area: their money, their family, their views on sex, their possessions, their temper, etc. This can happen in a church of believers, and Paul rightly understood this. It also happens in societies.

Last week I quoted James Madison (one of the writers of the U.S. Constitution). He wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."² True enough. But the founders of this country knew that men and women are not angels and that human nature is subject to corruption, and so government and laws are necessary to protect citizens from each other *and* from government. (We sometimes forget that part, that people need to be protected from their government. But when you think about it, it makes sense. Governments are run by men and women who themselves are not angels, and left unchecked they may well use governmental powers for selfish ends).

The founders of this nation were convinced (as am I) that a society that gave much freedom to individuals would prosper and best meet the needs of the most people, more so than a society controlled by government or king. At the same time, they realized that such a society, which gave so much freedom to individuals, would only work well if a majority of the citizens were virtuous and

²"The Federalist No. 51," *Independent Journal*, February 6, 1788.

aspired to virtue. Although not all the leaders of this new nation were devout Christians, they recognized how important “religion” was in the lives of people and the health of the nation. And by “religion” they meant Christianity. Christianity calls people to a life in Christ; which life had the most potential for moving people to a more nearly angelic character, and at a minimum, turning them away from their selfish and sinful nature. In other words a virtuous and free citizenry could do more good for more people, than a citizenry that must be constrained and coerced to live in a manner deemed (by government) to be beneficial to society.

Samuel Adams observed, “A general dissolution of principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy. While the people are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but when once they lose their virtue then will be ready to surrender their liberties to the first external or internal invader.”³ And again from George Washington, “Arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of liberty abused to licentiousness.”⁴ It seems these men understood what Paul had written: true freedom is found in the virtue which Christ’s Spirit can impart; and the abuse of freedom to indulge selfish passions is a false freedom that only leads to bondage again.

Fruit of Bondage vs. Fruit of Freedom

Paul contrasts the behaviors or “fruit” of the flesh, by which he means human nature unredeemed by Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit. “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy drunkenness, carousing, and things like these....those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” The consequence of ignoring the Spirit of God in our living, the consequence of abusing our freedom, is broken community and broken lives. Enmities, jealousy, quarrels, dissensions, factions... do you experience those things in your family, or place of work, or at school, or elsewhere? How much fun is it? Those things are quicksand on which to build a church or society. Only a foundation in Christ will do.

Paul writes that “the acts of the sinful nature are obvious,” but equally obvious is the “fruit of the Spirit” that each of us can, by the power of Christ, display. The fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Clearly those are virtues on which to successfully build a congregation and nation. And quite frankly life becomes a lot more fun when we live in that manner. Yet those qualities cannot be manufactured, though they can certainly be encouraged. For those virtues to take root and grow they must be surely planted by the Spirit of Christ, who comes to those who give their

³ Samuel Adams, letter to James Warren, February 12, 1779.

⁴ George Washington, Circular to the States, May 9, 1753.

lives to our Lord.

When we commit our lives to Christ we will find ourselves straddling both lists – “works of the flesh” and “fruit of the Spirit” - in our humanness. We desire to exhibit the fruit of the spirit in our living, but in our humanness we may fall back to the works of the flesh. That is why we need confession, both public and private. That is why we must pray about everything we do in this church. That is why we must continually pray for one another. That is why we need to keep both of Paul's lists before us. The former is a list of behaviors we seek to avoid and the latter is a list of attributes that Christ empowers us to follow.

The Christian is free because he does not have to acquire salvation by his own works, but because he has already been given the gift of salvation in Christ. The Christian is free to work it out in obedience. In each concrete situation the Christian is free not because he must obey God, but because *wants* to obey God. He doesn't have to justify himself before God by doing good works, for he has already been accepted by God. In gratitude he wants to do good and right. And because of Christ's Spirit the Christian is helped and encouraged and strengthened to live the free Christian life.

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue? The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature.

George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796