

**Freedom****Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

We are in the season of celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with barbeques, family gatherings, fireworks, discussions about freedom...how we live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” We think of all those brave men and women that fought, and many of whom died so that we may have liberty and freedom! “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). This is both the gospel claim and a missional cause: that our lives and actions are to reveal that freedom. But what does such freedom look like? Apparently, Christian freedom does not look like living an unencumbered life.

The idea that freedom means the absence of encumbrances may be popular but it does not hold weight. Freedom is not the absence of entanglements; entanglements are the means by which freedom becomes meaningful. Who is freer: the confirmed bachelor or the husband and father discovering the range of emotions, values, and possibilities made possible through those relationships? Who will be freer: people in a society that votes for leaders who shape the laws that govern them or people in a society in which people have stopped voting? Who is freer: the woman who chooses to take ordination vows that bind her to the church or the one for whom ordination is not an option? Freedom is not separation from relationships; it is a feature of relationships that becomes especially apparent as a result of our relationships with Jesus Christ.

What kind of relationships create the possibilities for Christian freedom? Paul's answer is that Christian relationships ought to be shaped by neighbor love. Neighbor love was emphasized by the law in Leviticus 19:18 and repeated by Jesus in Matthew 22:39. Paul's vision of neighbor love recognizes that people not only do but ought to value themselves: you would not want someone else to "bite and devour" you, so do not do so to them.

Paul presented two lists, one of the flesh and the other of the Spirit, but Paul's problem with the flesh is not that it desires but that its desires are disordered; it wants the wrong things or wants good things in the wrong way—usually too much or too little. Wanting sexual intimacy, it pursues fornication; wanting contact with the Divine, it pursues idols; wanting joy, it carouses. Connecting this point to Paul's emphasis on freedom suggests that disordered desires enslave us to our passions and destroy community. To Paul's readers, that claim would be obvious. The list Paul provides is similar to any number of lists floating around the Greco-Roman world at the time. For example, both Plato and Aristotle composed similar lists. For Paul, however, the appropriate response to disordered desire is neither the rejection of desire nor surrender to it. Instead, it is to desire properly, which is made possible by the work of the Spirit, which also desires. In contemporary cultures that manifest themselves in the stoic refusal to desire or the libertine refusal to have those desires reshaped, the patient practices of having our desires remade takes time and Spirit.

This led Paul to talk about the fruit of the Spirit. This fruit is more than just the benefit that accrues from being guided by the Spirit in ways that allow us freely to love our neighbors. The Spirit shapes us through these virtues to be the particular kind of people to whom this fruit tastes sweet. It is not that we discern what God has done on our behalf and then love our neighbors in response. Rather, discerning what God has done in Christ and what Christ has done for us shapes the way we love our neighbors, and loving our neighbors helps us see what God has done. (**Mark Douglas**)

In these verses from Galatians, Paul is saying unequivocally that freedom is *for love*. For Paul, the harsh debates and infighting among the young Christians in Galatia were outward and visible signs of an ongoing enslavement. They had discovered occasions for bondage in the very context designed to be life giving for them. The Galatians were allowing debates over circumcision to be given precedence over the law of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Focus on the flesh in the form of circumcision paradoxically prevented appropriate "religion" which is from the Latin word meaning "to bind together". Letting go of the "law" required liberation from considerations of the "flesh"—in this case from matters of

circumcision. So the task was that of turning attention to the power of the Spirit to direct their decisions, relationships, and, indeed, their core identity as human beings and children of God.

In these passages we find Paul emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit in the renewal of membership in community—that *binding together* of the Messiah's faithful people—and the new life that results. This is, for Paul, the source of the fruit of the Spirit such as love, joy, peacefulness, generosity, and so on. They are taken up by the Spirit and into the community of the body of Christ. **(J. William Harkins)**

Christian freedom is not unrestrained permission to do whatever one pleases. Paul reminds the Galatian Christians that God called them to freedom, but he adds, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (or "for self-indulgence," 5:13b). The counterpoint to life in the "flesh" is a life of loving service for the benefit of others (v. 13c); it is "faith working through love" (v. 6). Love is the way that freedom in Christ expresses itself (v. 13d). Indeed, freedom in Christ makes radical loving service possible, which fulfills the will of God for human relationships (v. 14).

Freedom to love and serve in the manner of Jesus is God's intention for humankind. Freedom is a gift from God given through faith. Like all good gifts, though, it can be misused and even cause harm (v. 15). Paul knows that people can misuse their freedom to dominate others. Conversely, people who love and serve can be taken advantage of and abused. Paul thus moves to distinguish between self-centered living in the realm of the "flesh" and God-centered living in the dominion of the Spirit.

Paul tells us to walk by the Spirit (vv. 16-25). Paul warns against the "works of the flesh," which are reflected in a host of self-centered practices (vv. 19-21). Paul exhorts the Galatians to rely instead on the Spirit's power for experiencing true freedom. Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control are but some chief examples of the Spirit's fruit that are actualized in and among believers (vv. 22-23). To bring this point home, Paul appeals to the risen crucified Christ as the basis for understanding the meanings and the relationships of servanthood, freedom, love, and the Spirit. **(Robert A. Bryant)**

I have spent time with two phenomenal women in the last two weeks that exemplify and model Christian freedom for me. The first was Sandhya Jha, the keynoter at the Women's retreat. She taught us to tell our story and encouraged us to remember how gracious God had been in our lives. Sandhya is the executive director of the Oakland Peace Center and is launching out on faith to do that work full-time, as she ends her pastorate at First Christian Church, Oakland, CA. She displayed the fruit of the Spirit.

The other woman is Hattie B Johnson King, a dear friend from college. You will remember her as the friend whose retirement celebration I told you Leroy and I would attend in Chicago on last Thursday – the one who knows too much about me for me to be comfortable. The retirement party was a wonderful celebration of her humble beginnings in Caruthersville, Missouri. But they soon moved into her 37+ years in the field of education. The things that were most impressive were not the resolution from the City Council of Chicago; not the statement from the Mayor of Chicago; not the resolution from the Governor of Illinois; not even the letter from the President of the United States. The revelations that were the most impressive were her love and devotion to the children she taught through the years; her leadership of her staff as she served as principal of a Chicago elementary school; and her love and service to God and family. Staff and community leaders said she demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit: seeing in the positive in all and encouraging them to be all that God had designed them to be.

When I looked in my brother's study Bible it said that the theme of Galatians is that grace transforms where the law fails. Paul was urging the Galatians to stop looking to the law to stimulate Christian growth. The Galatians who had been saved by faith were trying to live their Christian lives by the law. God has made us free in Christ and we are indeed free to love and serve each other! Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July! Just remember we are saved to love and serve!

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