

# Christian Freedom and the Spirit-filled Life

Galatians 5:1, 22-26; 6:7-10  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On the back side of this 4th of July weekend, it is appropriate that we reflect a bit upon the blessings of freedom, independence, and liberty - blessings that we too often take for granted in this country. It is also appropriate that today's Epistle Reading from Galatians begins with the words, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1).

When the Apostle Paul wrote these words about freedom, do you suppose he had the same meaning in mind that we do as people living in the United States in the year 2019? The dictionary defines and associates freedom primarily with autonomy, independence, and power to make our own choices and decisions without coercion. Our modern-day understanding of freedom in this country often comes with the belief that as long as we stay within the boundaries of the law, individuals can pretty much take on a "do as I please" approach toward life. Such a concept, however, would *not* have been included in Paul's understanding of freedom. After all, they were under the domination and control of the Roman Empire. That's not freedom to us.

**For Christian freedom is just that: freedom *in Christ*, not freedom in and of itself. According to Paul, since it is Christ who has set us free, we are therefore obligated to Christ, and therefore bound to Christ's service in the world.** The freedom he envisions here is freedom from the *law*, the ancient laws of Moses and how they no longer pertain to the issue of redemption and salvation. **It is by God's loving grace alone that we are justified, and not by our good works or following some strict code of conduct.** Paul extended this understanding of God's grace to include Gentile converts to Christianity, without them having to convert first to Judaism and go through the Jewish rite of circumcision.

Again, of utmost importance to Paul is his insistence on the One who calls us to freedom - Christ. Therefore, Paul urges the Galatian Christians to remember their calling, **a calling that carries with it both freedom and obligation. For does not freedom pose new and additional responsibilities?** That's often a hard lesson to learn, and something we all discovered while growing into adulthood.

Paul reveals more about his understanding of freedom when he warns, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." Instead, in our freedom we are called to a life of loving service to each other. **Freedom in Christ, then, is not so much freedom from something, as it is freedom to do something. Freedom in Christ is about the freedom to love, to live by the law of love.** When we do this, we live in and through the Spirit of God. And the signs of living by the Spirit are reflected in and by the following: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and

self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Paul calls these traits the "**fruit of the Spirit**," and they are a gift from God. We should not interpret this fruit, however, as referring only to individual personal character qualities. **Paul, as always, is primarily concerned with the way in which the Spirit's work is made manifest in community – how we treat one another and live together as the people of God.** So, Paul warns those in the church to not become conceited, competing against one another, and envying one another. His vision of the church is that we should embody the love of Christ in ways characterized by the fruit of the Spirit.

We can use that list, then, as a measuring stick to see how well we are living together as a community of faith, and how well we reflect these characteristics with others in our daily lives, including with those with whom we disagree. **Are we, then, a congregation that exhibits love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?** As Paul writes in verse 25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." According to this text, when we allow ourselves to be led by God's Spirit we will act responsibly toward each other within the context of our fellowship, in and through our personal relationships with one another.

Paul gets to the heart of the matter when he quotes a familiar proverb, "**for you reap whatever you sow**" (Gal. 6:7). We are presented here with a choice of sowing seeds in one of two fields. This metaphor is well stated in the Jerusalem Bible translation, "If we sow in the field of self-indulgence we will get a harvest of corruption out of it; if we sow in the field of the Spirit we will get for it a harvest of eternal life."

**So, what might keep us from sowing in the field of the Spirit?** Paul has a very interesting answer: **weariness**. Specifically, weariness that results in discouragement that eventually leads to giving up. Now, weariness is something I think we all can relate to. As any farmer or gardener knows, it may be weeks or months after a seed is planted before any results are seen. Such is the case when sowing spiritual seeds. Parents certainly know this in planting seeds with their children. **When results are not often seen right away it's easy to become weary, discouraged, and tempted to give up.** Paul may have been thinking of his own extensive efforts that he expended on the church in Galatia. You and I may be thinking of our extensive efforts here at College Hill, or in other areas of our lives. So, Paul clearly warns, "**Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up**" (Gal. 6:9). **Perseverance, then, is an important and crucial key in living a Spirit-led life.**

I'll end with Paul's final thought on this subject, at least in this particular letter. "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal. 6:10). What we are reminded of in today's biblical text is that Christian freedom requires a lot of hard and dedicated work. As Paul reveals elsewhere in this letter, it involves bearing one another's burdens, providing for each other, persevering in doing good, and working for the well-being of everyone, particularly our fellow church members. The great Protestant Reformer, **Martin Luther**, summarized Galatians' paradox of Christian freedom with these words: "**A Christian is the most-free person of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.**"

A Spirit-led life, a life guided by the indwelling Spirit of God working within, among, and through each one of us, is reflected in how we live together in community. May God give us the strength and perseverance to fulfill this part of our mission and vision for our own personal lives, and for the life of College Hill.

Amen.