

What the Bible Says About Freedom

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

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The state of freedom in our nation, and democracy itself, is a bit of a mess right now. Due to a politically-skewed activist Supreme Court, recent decisions have both granted and denied freedoms as we have known them for decades.

There's a new freedom to carry handguns outside the home without any specific reason except for self-defense, though slight progress has been made. States are given freedom to gerrymander congressional district maps to make sure their particular political party wins elections. Free speech has been granted to allow prayer again in public schools. And notice that it's conservative evangelicals promoting their particular brand of Christianity. That's religious coercion no matter how you look at it. What does that say to those who happen to be Muslim, Jewish, or whatever? A further erosion of the separation of church and state now grants the freedom of religious schools to receive public grants.

Other freedoms have been taken away. The erosion of voting rights is one victim. The Environmental Protection Agency has been stripped of their once-granted freedom to protect the environment through their efforts to combat climate change by denying them the authority to regulate and thus reduce carbon output. And most shockingly, based on the politicians in power in each state, there is the denial of gender equality when it comes to the freedom of a woman's right to make decisions about her own health care.

You may or may not agree with the decisions in this list of granting and denying freedoms I have just outlined. What is not debatable, however, is that on so many levels, we are becoming the Divided States of America. But as mentioned last Sunday, we must not give in to despair. We must continue to hold on to hope and advocate for those freedoms that result in equality, equity, fairness, and justice for ALL Americans.

Why bring all this up in church on this 4th of July weekend? One. Freedom of speech. Two. Freedom of religion. Three. **We must not conflate freedom as defined in 21st century America with what the Bible says about freedom.** Therefore, it is appropriate that today's Epistle Reading from Galatians 5 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 2022?

The dictionary defines and associates freedom primarily with autonomy, independence, and the 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 and businesses can pretty much take on a "do as I please" approach toward life and work. Such a concept, however, would *not* have been included in Paul's understanding of

freedom. After all, they were under the domination, control, and occupation of the Roman Empire. That's not our understanding of freedom.

Christian freedom, therefore, which is the point of this sermon, 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 specific 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. Instead, **it is by God's loving grace alone that we are justified**, not by our good works or following some strict code of conduct. Paul even extended this understanding of God's grace to include Gentile converts to Christianity, without them having to convert first to Judaism.

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**." Freedom in Christ, then, is both freedom *from* something (the law), and freedom *to do* something (providing loving service to each other). Ultimately, 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 Paul provides us with a list of those signs that reflect we are living by the Spirit: 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 and embodied in community – how we treat one another and live together as the people of God**.

Therefore, Paul warns those in the church to not become conceited, competing against one another, and envying others. His vision of the community of faith is that we should embody the love of Christ in ways characterized and manifested 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.

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. Therefore, in this somewhat post-pandemic phase, **developing, renewing, and strengthening our relationships should become a priority**. And yes, this is best done in person, face-to-face.

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, and no, it's not Satan. It's **weariness**. Specifically, weariness that

results in discouragement that eventually leads to giving up. Now, weariness is something I think we all can relate to. But 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. And parents certainly know this in planting seeds of wise-living 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 he founded in Galatia. You and I may be thinking of our extensive efforts here at College Hill, especially during this pandemic, 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 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 taught in today's biblical text is that Christian freedom requires a lot of hard and dedicated work. As Paul reveals elsewhere in this letter and in today's passage, 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 Sacred Presence and Spirit of God working among, within, and through each one of us, is embodied and reflected in how we live together in community. Therefore, as we reflect upon our freedoms, or lack thereof, in our nation on this 4th of July weekend, let us also reflect upon that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Amen.