

# Called To Freedom

## 4th of July Weekend

Galatians 5:1, 13-18, 22-25  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Each year on the Sunday before or on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July I feel the need to place an emphasis on freedom and liberty. Some years I find that harder to do than others. This year, for example, I find it necessary to start by **speaking out against what is described as Christian Nationalism**. We spent several Adult Church School classes earlier this year learning about this growing, though not new movement.

**Adherents** to Christian Nationalism are seeking to interweave a set of narrow Christian beliefs with how our government should be run and our laws dictated. **Critics** of these efforts see this as a distortion of the overall message of the gospel by combining faulty Christian theology with the erroneous notion that God has a special bond with the United States over and against other nations and other religions.

**Christian Nationalism, by its very purpose, seeks to exert power and control over others, thus actually becoming a very real danger to both religious liberty and democracy itself in this nation.** It truly disturbs and even scares me just how many may be hearing such a dangerous message on this Sunday before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Evidently, Christian Nationalists have conveniently ignored Jesus' words found in Matthew 20:25-26. "But Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.'"

And don't get me started on the **Supreme Court**. In one Their majority decision just a few days ago to **grant businesses the freedom to discriminate based on their own personal religious beliefs** is going to have serious repercussions, and yes, particularly with the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

So, now that I've gotten all that out of my system, let's look at freedom and liberty not in an American political sense, which progressive Christians should be concerned about, but rather a biblical one. In a biblical context we can explore larger issues of **communal freedom such as freedom from social, economic, or political oppression**. Such freedom is the liberation from any number of various forms of injustice. This is a major theme, for instance, that runs throughout the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament.

There is a different experience of freedom, however, presented in the New Testament – in and through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Today's Epistle lesson 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."** - Galatians 5:1

When the apostle Paul wrote these words about freedom to the ancient church in Galatia (which was the name of a province in the Roman Empire, located in modern day Turkey), do you suppose Paul had the same meaning of "freedom" in mind that we do as people living in the United States of America in the 21st century?

**The dictionary defines and links freedom primarily with autonomy, independence, and power to make our own choices and decisions without coercion.** Far too many people today

have taken this to mean having the license to "do as I please." It often wraps itself in the childhood mantra, "You're not the boss of me." We all saw this exhibited and used as an excuse, for example, when many folks refused to wear facemasks or be vaccinated during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Such a concept of 'doing as one pleases' would not be included, however, in the apostle Paul's understanding of freedom.** After all, they were under the subjugation of the Roman Empire and were not free in most of the ways according to modern understanding. Freedom, as understood in a biblical context, addresses a much narrower understanding. **Paul specifically addresses Christian freedom, which 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 as our liberator, and therefore bound to Christ's service in the world. In verse 13 Paul writes, "**For you were called to freedom**, my siblings."

**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 redeemed, made right with God, and not by our good works or following some strict code of conduct.** Paul urges the Galatian Christians to remember their calling, **a calling that carries with it both freedom and obligation.** Does not freedom in any form pose new and additional responsibilities, not less?

Paul reveals more about his understanding of freedom when he warns, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Gal. 5:13). As you can see, freedom was never intended as a blanket "do as you please." Paul continues with the admonition that we must become servants to one another. The major challenge to us today, then, is **how can we lovingly serve each other more fully here in this community of faith, and out in our daily lives?** For as Paul writes in verse 14, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, '**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**'" That commandment, by the way, didn't originate with Jesus, but comes from the Old Testament book of Leviticus – how's that for irony.

We come to realize, therefore, that **freedom in Christ 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, to serve one another as our response to the love and grace that God has extends to us – to you, to me.** When we *don't* live this way, Paul warns, we face the consequences of destroying our sense of community, and perhaps even ourselves, in the process. That is why Paul warns those in the church, then and now, to give up arrogant, envious, and competitive behavior.

Paul's vision of the church is that we should embody the love of Christ in ways characterized by what he calls the "**fruit of the Spirit**". He lists those traits as, "**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control**" (Gal. 5:22-23). Remember, **Paul's emphasis is always on the community-building character of the Holy Spirit's work among and within us.**

As we celebrate this 4<sup>th</sup> of July, reflecting upon the liberty and freedoms this country has to offer, let us also remember how far **we still have to go to living into true freedom and equality and equity for everyone. Every. Single. One.** And let us also celebrate our freedom in Christ, which is **a call to unselfish and loving service to others.**

This is the freedom to which we are called to live.

Amen.

Resources:

Robert P. Jones, "Let's celebrate this Fourth of July without the myth of white Christian innocence," *Religious News Service (RNS)*, July 2, 2021