

“Christian Freedom”

Galatians 5:1, 13-23

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November 14, 2021

This sermon was inspired by a telephone call I had this past week with my nephew back in New Jersey, a family member I’ve always been close to. I hadn’t talked to him for a while and was interested in hearing how he was faring of late. After the usual chit chat, I made the fatal mistake of asking whether he had already received his vaccination for the COVID virus. Suddenly, he went off on a rant on how there was no way he was going to get it, that it was all b.s. to begin with. He argued, “You can’t trust the health experts. I had a friend who died from the disease even though he had received his shots.” Besides, he claimed that it was within his rights to refuse it, that he was free to decide whatever he wanted to do with his own body and no one could tell him otherwise. I knew that trying to present him with the facts or argue to the contrary was just a complete waste of time, so I wished him luck and told him I’d be in touch again soon.

You hear a lot of the same sentiment these days- people insisting they have the right not to get vaccinated and then turning belligerent when they hear that for reasons of public safety, they’ve been mandated to socially distance themselves or wear a mask or present proof of vaccination before entering a restaurant or boarding a plane. They’re convinced it’s enshrined in the Bill of Rights that they can do whatever they want and no one can tell them anything different. Of course, that is to completely misinterpret the purpose of such mandates OR even our own CONSTITUTION for that matter. The fact is that one person’s freedom may be another person’s “unfreedom.” Drunk driving is ALSO a personal choice but almost everyone understands that driving under the influence presents a grave danger to others as well as to oneself. There are times when the well-being of society requires some sort of collective action involving public restrictions whether people are happy about them or not.

If people had to name one ideal that Americans typically venerate the most, it would have to be liberty, both our individual as well as corporate freedoms. It was the deeply-rooted desire to take charge of their OWN destiny that led our forefathers to declare independence from England two hundred and fifty years ago. However, one can question if as individuals, we are ever REALLY free? While we may no longer be under the external thumb of some other nation or political system, we undoubtedly REMAIN enslaved to OTHER forces we often aren’t aware of and have little or no control over. We’ve never struggled under a greater range of addictions as we do today- whether it is to drugs or food or sex or gambling, to alcohol or TV, our cell phones or the internet and I could go on and on. Giant corporations pay millions of dollars each year to Madison Ave. advertising agencies to unconsciously influence our desires and create new needs in us. Without realizing it, we are constantly absorbing life-altering chemicals that affect our bodies and alter our brains- from the foods we eat to the air we breathe, while we are discovering all the time how our futures are increasingly determined by the DNA locked deep within our genes. Rather than “free” individuals with free wills, it might be truer to say that each of us is a social construction with an array of unconscious drives and impulses we can’t control or don’t care to. To quote Bishop William Willimon, the well-known Methodist preacher and teacher:

*Ironically, the story that the point of life is to be free to choose the life we want is a story that we did NOT choose—it was externally imposed upon us by a culture that cannot think of any purpose for living other than to be free to choose our own self-constructed purpose for living. We relish our freedom to have anything we like, failing to see how advertising creates our desires, limiting our ability to know what we like other than what advertising tells us to like. The modern world—bewitched by the fantasy of the role-less, unattached, free individual—fails to acknowledge its own peculiar forms of servitude.*

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians has sometimes been called the Christian's "Charter of Freedom" because of its emphasis on one's liberty in Jesus Christ. He is specifically contending with those Christians who insist that salvation is dependent upon fulfilling the Mosaic Law- in this case, male circumcision. The great Apostle exhorts them to live, not in enslavement to the Law but in the FREEDOM that comes with FAITH IN CHRIST. The Law along with its prescriptions of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" CANNOT save- it can only condemn, and for those who try to achieve righteousness through it, it can only lead to GREATER SIN in their lives. However, for those who trust in him, Christ has purchased our freedom from sin's slavery by his own blood. We are forgiven and no longer need to toil under the harsh burdens of its commandments any longer. The fact is that it is impossible to earn God's love or prove in any way that we are worthy of our salvation. On the contrary, it is a free gift from God, graciously bestowed upon us for no other reason than that God loves us, and the more we are able to grasp this, the greater freedom we can both experience and exercise.

This naturally raises an important question, especially to the minds of Paul's detractors: If there is no threat of condemnation for sinning, what is to keep people from sinning more and more? Without any consequence, won't people just indulge in every kind of evil practice? If it is true that we're now under grace and not Law, then does this not mean we have the freedom to do ANYTHING we want because we know that God will FORGIVE US AFTERWARDS, as some in the church in Corinth argued? He warns the Galatians not to use their freedom in Christ as an opportunity to selfishly do what feels good to them. Instead, they should without any thought to themselves serve each other in love, a theme he FURTHER expands upon in his epistle to the church in Rome. Christians have been SET FREE from their enslavement to their baser instincts, that is, free from their own selfishness, lust, greed, and pride in order to become enslaved to SOMETHING ELSE, to become slaves of Christ who HIMSELF came to serve, not to be served, and who expects the same of those who follow HIM. To quote Paul from his letter to the Romans:

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

For Paul, we are all slaves to something and for him, we are either slaves to righteousness or we are slaves to sin. The good news is that as Children of God, we now have a NEW master, and instead of always giving in to our own worst impulses, we are suddenly motivated to serve others in an attitude of selfless love. Our duty is now to follow CHRIST'S way in the world and no longer our own desires.

Galatians 5:1 emphatically states that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. The Jews were the most rule-conscious people on the face of the earth- it seems they could never do ANYTHING simply. The rabbis calculated that the Law contained 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commands- that's 613 laws! What a contrast from their God who saw fit to give his people only TEN commandments, of which Jesus further reduces down to just TWO- you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and will; and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. You see, Jesus was more concerned with getting to the HEART or ESSENCE of a person's relationship to God and not having it become lost in a lot of incidental rules and regulations which really had NOTHING to do with God or God's righteousness. If we love our fellow brother and sisters, then we are NOT going to lie or steal or covet or bear false witness against them. If we love, we're NOT going to kill or violate our marriage covenant with our spouse by committing adultery. Love FULFILLS the law and yet goes BEYOND it by not only working no ill, but by doing every possible GOOD for them.

Christ asks us to come to him in faith and enjoy the only TRUE freedom we can ever possibly experience. There is no other freedom in which we find ourselves freed from ourselves, liberated from all the alluring inducements and attachments offered by this world. As Paul puts it, at last we have been freed from the "old man" and its old desires which has been crucified with Christ and is now dead. Such a freedom comes through Christ alone- a freedom won by him by his death on that cross. It is not a "right" nor is it any kind of "possession." Rather, it is a "gift of God"- a gift which our Lord now offers to you, to me, and to ANYONE ELSE who would simply desire to receive it. He does not "command" us to love him, after all, how can you possibly "command" someone to LOVE another person, much less to love GOD; there can be no freedom in a relationship when love is commanded or coerced. Instead he disarms us; he wins us over by his examples of love as shown in the Gospels and the sheer graciousness of his offer. And when we DO accept it, we then develop a NEW servitude- not to OURSELVES but to HIM. Thus, Christ alone earns our highest allegiance; to him ONLY do we address as "our Lord and our God!"

The battle between obedience to the Law and our freedom under grace is just as alive and well today as it was two thousand years ago during the time of St. Paul. Years ago, after I had transferred from a large liberal university where I was a rebel and student protester to a small Pentecostal Bible college where I had to learn to be a conformist, I found myself having to obey lots of rules and regulations, none of which had ANYTHING to do with my salvation or helping me grow in grace. For instance, everyone had to be in their dorms by 10:00 p.m. regardless of how old you were. You couldn't wear any beards or mustaches nor have hair below your collar line. There was no hand-holding with members of the opposite sex and certainly no smoking or drinking. Even such "worldly pursuits" as going to movies or playing cards or listening to hard rock music was frowned upon. We had to be in chapel five times a week and if you missed more than three during the course of a semester, you could consider yourself gone. It was worse than the ARMY and there were times I was convinced I was ACTUALLY in training to become a PHARISEE instead of a minister of the Gospel!

But as I grew and matured in my Christian life, I was able to break away from a lot of the "legalism" that was then a significant part of my faith back then. I saw God LESS as a great POLICEMAN waiting to beat me over the head with his stick at the slightest infraction, and MORE as a LOVING PARENT who knew and wanted what was best for me, one who desired nothing more than to enjoy an intimate relationship with me. Hence, I eventually discovered a

freedom in serving Christ I had never known before- one that was no longer based on trying to keep the Ten Commandments, which really had NOTHING to do with my relationship to him or with being a good person. Instead, I found myself reveling in his love and growing in greater appreciation of him for it. Hence, when my father died back in 1975, I inherited his pipe collection and I continued to smoke them until I gave the habit up about fifteen years ago, and I still enjoy drinking beer with my friends. When I pastored in Syracuse, I was part of a poker group made up of fellow church members while today, Rose and I love nothing more than going out on a dinner date and capping it off with a good movie. Where such activities would have given my teachers fits back then, I don't think my spiritual life has suffered any the worse for it. In fact, most of it now looks rather harmless and even quite SILLY if I might say so.

You see, as time went on, I was able to separate that which was TRULY essential about my faith from that which was NOT, that instead of a lot of rules and regulations to guide me, I was developing an inner compass which was helping me to make right and responsible decisions. In retrospect, those rules which once figured so prominently in my life were a form of training wheels for me. By providing me with some structure, they kept me from falling down while I was learning to walk with one hand in Christ's. However, as I CONTINUED to mature in my sojourn with him, I learned to put aside those training wheels and trust more and more the little voice inside of me which would instruct me in the ways I should go. I found by intensively studying the Word of God and allowing it to mold both my mind and my conscience, by trusting that God through his Holy Spirit was now applying those principles to my heart, Christ was gradually taking deeper root inside of me, shaping my inner life to his own. This is why immediately after instructing the Galatian church as to the importance of "loving their neighbor as they loved themselves," he commands them to live by the Spirit:

*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*(Gal. 5:16-18)

And if we are led by the Spirit, we shall then manifest the FRUIT PRODUCED by that VERY SAME Spirit that is operant in our lives, fruit which Paul enumerates a few verses later: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy , peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there IS no law."(Gal. 5:22-23)

Years ago, I came across a saying attributed to St. Augustine which I was quite impressed by. In fact, I made it my motto in life, even writing it in the frontispiece of my Bible. It was in Latin and it went like this: "Dilige et Quod Vis Fac" which translated reads "Love God and do what you will." That for me represented the ULTIMATE FREEDOM, that if you loved God, if your heart was right, you wouldn't have to worry about fulfilling certain laws and precepts, most if not ALL which have NOTHING to do with our salvation or relationship to God. If love of God becomes the first and ONLY commandment we follow, then everything ELSE— INCLUDING our love for our neighbor--would quite naturally flow from out of our love for GOD. We will always rightly love our neighbors when we love them IN God and FOR God's sake. The implication of this is that if we TRULY love God, then we wouldn't hate or discriminate on the basis of whether a person was a sinner or a saint, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, white or black, gay or straight, Jew or Gentile, Christian or Muslim, an American citizen or illegal immigrant for the love of God at work IN and THROUGH us would

clearly break down whatever barriers had been erected in the FIRST place. If we truly love God FIRST, then we will love all OTHERS--REGARDLESS of how different from ourselves they may be--with that very SAME love.

In closing, let me say that I'm a real fan of Willie Geist who is seen most mornings on Morning Joe and The Today Show, and who by the way ALSO happens to be a Christian and a PRESBYTERIAN at that. The other day he was interviewing Bill DeBlasio, the outgoing mayor of New York City. The Mayor was stating how important maskings and vaccinations and enforcing mandates have been, that only by observing such temporary restrictions would the city ever regain her freedom. He said, "The GOAL after all has been FREEDOM. Because New Yorkers have faithfully followed laws regarding social distancing, the wearing of masks, and getting their vaccinations, restaurants are once again being filled, people are back in their offices, tourists are returning, and you hear the sound of persons laughing once again." Willie picked up on that and remarked how paradoxical it is, how observing a law can eventually lead to one's freedom. "After all," he said, "what IS freedom but the ability of individuals to lead their own lives once again, to return to their jobs, and to be with the people they love- all of which we were deprived of for the past two years. The IRONY here, Mr. Mayor, is that it is the mandates and masks and vaccinations that are giving us back our freedom."

I thought the observation both Willie and the Mayor made was MORE than a mere SOCIAL COMMENT, that it was also an important THEOLOGICAL statement. You see, the Christian life contains its OWN paradox. As human beings, we will always be slaves to someone or SOMETHING in this world- there is no escaping that. The question becomes "what do we want to become slaves TO?" We can be slaves to OUR SINFUL SELVES, that is, TO OUR OLD MAN WITH ALL ITS DESTRUCTIVE VICIES. That includes enslavement to THE WAYS OF THIS WORLD AND ALL ITS ALLUREMENTS AND ATTACHMENTS. Or we can become SLAVES TO CHRIST HIMSELF- a servitude that doesn't lead to hopelessness, despair, and eventually to self-destruction but instead leads to our SPIRITUAL FREEDOM, a slavery that offers one everlasting love and joy, peace and hope for that's what you can expect when Christ makes you TRULY free. But here is the paradox- the more securely we are tethered to Christ, the more obedient we are to HIS way rather than the WORLD'S ways, THE MORE FREE WE BECOME! The fact is that we are never MORE FREE than when we draw closer to him, when we become ever more enslaved to him and the example he left for us. Only then will we ever discover the meaning behind those hope-filled words of Jesus, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Amen and amen.