

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

5For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The Letter to the Galatians has been called Paul's finest statement on Christian freedom. Our reading this morning begins with his brilliant assertion: "For freedom Christ has set us free." In just seven words, Paul declares our salvation and he gives us a mission statement. Christ has made us free. He did that so we can live for him.

Freedom is foundational. Freedom was the issue that made Christianity a distinct way of having a relationship with God apart from the Law. Fifteen hundred years later it was the issue at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. Today we have to continue to call each other to live as free people because, while we are anxious to claim our freedom, we tend to do a theological broad jump over what freedom means.

There is an intrinsic need for freedom. People with no particular religious beliefs can get very excited on the topic of freedom. But a definition of freedom sends everybody off in different directions.

We have a wide variety people, many of whom do not like each other very much, all agreeing that freedom is the most important thing in life. But then they start talking about what freedom means and the conversation turns to national borders and the environment and government surveillance and personal relationships – and they wind up pointing their fingers at each other and saying, “You hate freedom.” Nobody hates freedom – but we sure have some different ideas about what it means.

In the past week a New Hampshire license plate advised me to live *free* or die, a fireworks stand told me I could buy one and get eleven *free*, and I watched a television commercial in which George Washington charged a platoon of British infantry while driving a Dodge Challenger and the narrator said, “There are two things America got right. Cars and freedom.” I think any of those uses of the words “free” or “freedom” would have to be explained at some length to the Apostle Paul – and I consider him an expert on the subject.

It is safe to say that by the time a subject this profound has been compacted to fit onto a license plate or a car commercial it is time to re-examine the issue and make sure we have it right.

Freedom is far too important to abandon, but let's not assume we understand what it means. Paul writes for us this morning: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." – Paul tells us that freedom will lead us to "love your neighbor as yourself". Loving your neighbor as yourself is as close to universally acknowledged right behavior as we are going to find. And – in that short stretch of two verses – he also tells us that, through freedom, we should "become slaves to one another" which, if you told a friend that you actually planned to live that way, would probably get you referred for counseling.

Freedom suffers from shallow definitions. People think they are doing freedom a favor when they define it as meaning "unencumbered", "no responsibilities", "no commitments", "no one has any claims on you". With that understanding, you could only be free as an individual. But, freedom does not mean a separation from relationships.

Freedom is what makes our commitments to each other mean something. We are free to choose to be committed. We are free to imagine new ways to make our lives and our community better. We can think of new ways for this congregation to serve. We can offer hope to people who do not have the energy to hope for themselves.

God does not want unthinking drones who have memorized the rules and are trying to avoid getting punished. He wants his children to ask him for guidance. He wants to give us strength to follow our freedom to make this world into God's home.

When we are free we want as much from ourselves as God does.

Paul writes to us, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law". In this case, when Paul uses the term "law" he is not talking about the guidance that God gives us for our lives. He is talking about the "law" as a threat. Paul calls us to be people who want

to do God's will because it is the best way to live, not because we are afraid we will go to hell if we don't. So Paul writes that we are "led by the Spirit ... not subject to the law".

God wants us to love him. We can not love God unless we also have the choice to reject him. Otherwise, doing the will of God would be forced obedience, not love. In this passage Paul writes of the law as the threat of force. He calls it "the yoke of slavery". But we are free; we can love God and that is more profound than just obeying God. "...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." The gift of freedom is not given to you so you can pamper the life that God has given you. It is to use your freedom, imagination, and energy to serve God's creation in ways that only you can do.

That is what Paul is talking about when he gives us this well-known list of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In our law-oriented way of thinking, we have a tendency to regard this as a list of rewards that are worth working for. We would like to have those things and it seems that Paul is promising we will get them if we do what God wants.

But they are not called "the rewards of the Spirit"; they are called "the fruit (singular) of the Spirit."

When we look for a reward for working hard the reward is usually some kind of security – often money. Please note: Paul does *not* write "The reward of good behavior is money, health, winning, comfort, and admiration." Those are all things people pray for and sometimes people get inattentive and start believing that if they follow God's rules, they will receive those rewards. People who ask God to enter into that bargain with them are asking God to relieve them of their burden of freedom. They want to exchange their freedom for security.

Sometimes we find that we have fashioned a belief that says, "If you obey God's rules he will reward you with security, wealth, health, success, ease, and approval." But

our scripture this morning says different. It says “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Those are not rewards for the end of the journey, they are tools for living today and tomorrow.

They are gifts that will make us feel so strong in the love of God that we are free to walk into each new day and not know what we will find there – armed only with the wisdom of how the world works and the love of God.

God wants us to love him, so in his wisdom he gives us freedom. He wants our love, not our fear. As free children of God, we must constantly decide what we will do in God’s service. You *chose* to come to church this morning, that makes your worship an act of love, not an obligation. The things you learn, the interest you take in this community, the money you give to the church, the time you donate – they are gifts you choose to give under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Freedom is dangerous. As you have probably noticed, when people are free a lot of them do not choose to learn, or take an interest in this community, or give money to the church, or donate their time – you could ask the church council members, and the church treasurer, and the nominating committee about that. But every name you read on *The Weekly Messenger* that has a responsibility this morning, took that responsibility as a free Christian. In the front of our hymnal, there are pages of the names of saints who have led the people of God at various times in the past two thousand years. Every name listed was responding to God’s love in freedom. All of us are led by Jesus Christ, who thought security was not having. Instead he lived a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. His earthly life ended on a cross, which is not a reward worth working for. But Jesus freely chose to bring the love of God into our lives – regardless of the cost. He went to the cross in freedom.

Do good work, help people, be generous, make this world a place that God will be happy to call his home. You are free to do that.

God loves us so much, he has given us the freedom to love him back.