

July 8, 2007
Pentecost 6

"You Were Called to Be Free"

GALATIANS 5:1,13-25

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ¹³ You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Remember the days when you first learned how to drive. You were totally focused on staying in the middle of your lane of traffic. Too far to the right and you went into the ditch, or hit the curb, or drove on the shoulder. Too far to the left and you went over the center dividing line and you were in danger of hitting an oncoming car.

You might compare this to your experience as a Christian when you know the freedom you have in Christ. There is danger of drifting over to one side into legalism. Legalism says there are still some rules and regulations and laws you need to add to what Christ has done for you to be truly free, truly forgiven, truly mature and truly at peace with God. Any attempt to supplement what Christ has done with what I do will ultimately supplant or destroy what Christ has done.

Then there is the danger or threat on the other side, the threat of license. License is the lack of restraint. It is the false teaching that says, "Since I am free in Christ, I am free to engage in sinful behavior because I know that it will always be forgiven." This is so dangerous because it leads us to gradually justify our evil deeds and cut corners with God. We are deceived and drawn away from Christ.

Paul's letter to the Galatians deals with these two threats or dangers to the freedom we have in Christ. The freedom we have in Christ is even more valuable than the freedom we enjoy in this country that we celebrated this past week on the Fourth of July with fireworks and patriotic music. Our soldiers, precious American soldiers, are giving their lives in different parts of the world so that we can continue to enjoy a country free from terrorists.

Christian soldiers must also be willing to stand up and defend the freedom they have in Christ even if it means rejection, ridicule or loss of life.

You are free from the yoke of slavery under the law

Listen again to how Paul summarizes the important freedom from the law that is ours in Christ. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery." Our nation has fought many battles and spilled the blood of many soldiers just so we can have freedom here this morning. We even fought a civil war, North against South to defend the rights of all people to be free and not be enslaved to other human beings. The freedom we have in Christ could not be won by human blood shed on the field of battle. It was gained for us by the blood of Christ shed on the cross to pay the ransom price for our sin.

I was born into this world a slave and so were you. We were under what Paul calls "the yoke of slavery." Inborn into every fiber of my being was this wrong belief that I could somehow ransom myself from the condemnation of sin by doing some good.

Let me give you an example to illustrate how foolish this was. When I was a child I did not understand the law of gravity. I thought to myself, "Why can't you jump out of an airplane, sitting on farm tractor or even a large chair or bale of hay, and at the last minute jump off just as it hits the ground?" I did not understand the law of gravity and the force that it has. Everyone born into this world is slave to even more foolish thinking because we do not understand the force of the law. The law demands perfection. That is why I cannot save myself, pull myself up by my bootstraps, or compensate God for the bad I have done. In Galatians 3 Paul tells us why this thinking does not work and why it makes us slaves to a false hope. "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written, 'Cursed if everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.'" We are cursed if we do not do everything written in the book of law and do it perfectly. That leaves us slaves to the law without hope.

The good news is that Jesus has made us free. 1 Peter 1:18,19 sums up this freedom so beautifully with these words, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." Some of you memorized the part of the catechism that says, "Christ has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from sin, death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his precious blood, and his innocent sufferings and death, that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in righteousness, innocence and blessedness." That's a freedom worth protecting at all cost, even dying for, if necessary.

Let me share a story of freedom that will illustrate this point more. Years ago an elderly man was walking down a street. He came upon a boy about 12 years old sitting on a park bench with a rusty bird cage. Inside was a sparrow that he was torturing by poking it with a stick. The man asked the boy what he was planning to do with the sparrow. With an evil grin on his face he said, "I am going to poke it with this stick and then I am going to take it home and feed it to my cat." The man asked, "How much do you want for the cage and

sparrow?" The boy said with a greedy smile on his face, "Ten dollars, not a penny less." The man pulled on the ten dollars, gave it to the boy and walked into the park. Then he let the bird go free, put the cage down and crushed it with his foot. We have freedom in Christ. Why would we ever want to go back to legalism, the slavery under the law, where Satan can daily torment us with the evil grin that we are never good enough to be loved by God?

Free to serve with new life in the Spirit

With this freedom in Christ comes a new life in the Spirit that wants to avoid sin rather than embrace it. Just as you would not want to drive over the center line and be struck by an oncoming car, you do not want to open to the destructive forces of sin that could actually rob you of the freedom you have in Christ. Listen to Paul again. "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."

I do not want to use the freedom I have in Christ to indulge my sinful nature. The actually Greek word here is "flesh." Even though we are new people in Christ with freedom to serve in his everlasting kingdom of love, we still have the old flesh clinging to our bones that has the potential to inflame our passions and desires to hurt each other instead of helping each other. Have you ever thought how hard it is to love people around you, in your family, in your marriage, at work, even in your church as much as you love yourself? Have you ever had a desire to hurt someone who has hurt you? Look at the cat playing with another cat, batting with its paws but holding in the claws. Then watch the cat defend itself against a cat it does not like, opening its claws, scratching, tearing open skin, infecting with deadly germs. That's how the Lord asks us to fight in our marriages and in our families, with soft, gentle, velvety blows, not pulling out the sharp claws, or even with holding affection when it needs to be there. God forbid that I should ever justify hurting someone because I am free in Christ.

Oh, such a new life of freedom in Christ is a tremendous struggle and battle. Paul speaks of the struggle with these words, "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 the law." When you realize you are free in Christ, you do not treat your neighbor or husband or wife, or father or mother, or brother or sister, with the hope of earning points with God. You do so out of love for freedom Christ has won for you by his perfect life and perfect death, and his glorious resurrection. Every day on this earth you are led by the Spirit to go to war against the sinful flesh inside you constantly saying to yourself, "How can I love other people as much as I love myself because Christ has set me free?" I am holding in my hand a guitar, and it can only play music if the string is tightened properly. The tension you feel in your life to live for Christ is a beautiful tension.

How do you know what to do to exercise or express your freedom? Do you want to know the right notes to sing a beautiful song of freedom for the Lord? Paul shares with us how to live our lives. "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious." You don't have to take a

special course in knowing what to do. Listen to the listing: "Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery." Keep yourselves away from sexual sins. That includes what comes into your life through the internet or the movies, or looking twice at a woman or man in lustful way. Stay away from idolatry and witchcraft. That includes loving your blessings more than loving the One who has blessed you. Watch out for being nasty to other people with "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy." Have you ever been in a work place where there is tension and fighting? Has this ever happened in your family? Have you seen it at school? Do you want this in life as part of the freedom you have in Christ? Do you want to join the drunks in town? Stay away from these things! If you continue in them, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. The life of a Christian who is free in Christ is one of daily repentance.

Because you are free in Christ, attached to him like a branch to a vine, the Holy Spirit will lead you to bear fruit out of love for Jesus. Here are the fruits the Holy Spirit is producing in your life. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control." Which of these is your favorite? Think about this for a moment. What a blessing it is to know that all of these fruits are coming forth in your life and mine because of the freedom we have in Christ. Why would we ever want to go back to thinking we can have greater freedom by returning to the slavery under the law, or even begin to think we can even more free by opening ourselves to sin? You have been called to be free in Christ. Enjoy that freedom this week. Cherish it. Protect it. Yes, even die for it if necessary. Amen.