

Scripture Reading for Sunday June 30th 2019

Galatians 5:1; 13-25 (NIV)

5 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.

¹³You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and 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.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

John 8: 31-36 (NIV)

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" ³⁴Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Sermon: Freedom *From* and Freedom *For*

St. Augustine famously said: “Love God and do whatever you please.”¹ John tells us that Jesus said: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”² And earlier, Paul writes to the Galatians: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”³ Such phrases sound like music to our modern ears, granting us permission to do whatever we like! Freedom to choose, freedom to consume, freedom to pursue self-fulfilment, self-expression and self-interest without regard for or to anyone else. That’s how many regard freedom in Western society today. However, there is always a danger in taking words - or a Bible verse - out of context! And so we need to explore what these important claims about freedom mean, both in principle and in practice.⁴ What we will quickly discover is that have both freedom *from* something *as well as* freedom *for* something, and we will be considering *both* this morning.

Last week I spoke about, “What makes a person OK with God?”⁵ and, citing Paul, I said: We are *not* made OK with God by trying to keep the Ten Commandments.⁶ We are made right with God in the same way Abraham was, namely, by *faith*.⁷ More specifically, by acknowledging the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ⁸ and his trust in God the Father, which was embodied in his self-giving death on the cross that set humanity free from bondage.⁹ All of Galatians 3 and 4 is summarised by Paul: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” But he goes on, “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke¹⁰ of slavery.”¹¹ Now, whenever you hear “freedom” and “slavery” in the same sentence, you should hear echoes of *God’s* action in rescuing Israel from oppression in Egypt during the time of Moses. Paralleling that image, God has acted *again* in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who is likened to the Passover Lamb¹² and through whom we have been rescued from bondage, in this case, to the Mosaic Law.¹³ I also said last week that Paul regarded that Law as a temporary tutor; its role was to expose selfishness, idolatry, and sin of every kind – which it did and still does. Yet all this does is produce guilt; the Law itself has no life-giving power.¹⁴ But the freedom Paul speaks about is liberation from the burdensome curse of the Law; one that is found through our new identity “in Christ”¹⁵ and *not* by

¹ In a sermon on 1 John 4:4-12; see: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm>

² John 8:32; see also John 14:6. Jesus also speaks about the “Spirit of truth,” see: John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13.

³ Gal 5:1.

⁴ This can be considered as a movement *from* theology *to* ethics; good theology is to be lived out!

⁵ See Gal 3: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Makes-You-OK-with-God.pdf>

⁶ Gal 3:10-11.

⁷ Gal 3:6; Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6.

⁸ Gal 3:22; 2:20. Modern translations (NET, NTE) make this distinction between “faithfulness” and “faith” clear.

⁹ Gal 3:13,23-25. That is, bondage to the Law’s curse and burden. And God vindicated Christ’s faithfulness in the resurrection.

¹⁰ The image of a “yoke” is often used to provide teaching, particularly teaching of the Torah. In this sense, a yoke provides stability and guidance rather than something which one is to chafe against; see also Matt 11:29-30.

¹¹ Gal 5:1. This is a summary of Gal 3-4, rather than the beginning of a new theme in the letter. Again, the primary emphasis is on what *Christ has done*: Gal 3:13; 4:4-5. Note on “standing firm,” see also Gal 2:4-5.

¹² John 1:29.

¹³ Just as by means of the exodus God formed the people of God (Israel) and led the to the Promised Land, so “in Christ” and through the Spirit, God is forming a new (eschatological) community, one that is moving towards completion in God’s good timing.

¹⁴ See Jer 24:6-7; 31:31-34; 32; 38-41. Ironically, Paul speaks of the Law as the source of a *curse* (Gal 3:10-11; Deut 12:26)!

¹⁵ This is signified in Christian *baptism*, which is implicit in Paul’s complex argument (3:6-29) - though made explicit in 3:27.

becoming ethnic Jews. Paul concludes we *now* live in a new era - the post-resurrection “age of the Spirit.”¹⁶ Consequently, he exhorts his readers: “Don’t get yourselves tied down *again* by the chains of slavery.”

Now, it is one thing to be set free from prison or slavery, and quite another to decide what to do with your freedom now that you have it. This is an issue faced by every criminal when released from prison: “Shall I use my new-found freedom to go and commit more crimes?” The fact that you are “free” doesn’t mean that going back to a former lifestyle is the right or wise thing to do. Freedom *from* restraint, if it is to be of any benefit, must be matched by a sense of freedom *for* a particular purpose.¹⁷

The term “freedom” itself can be understood – or misunderstood – in many ways. For example, we must be careful to *not* let this freedom won by Christ be confused with nationalistic ambitions about freedom and wrap Jesus in a flag. Yes, it’s Canada Day tomorrow and July 4th is coming up, but this freedom is not to be understood in *political* terms.¹⁸ Moreover, Paul is *not* speaking about rugged individualism or an inner liberty of conscience or the will. Freedom is, therefore, to be sharply distinguished from autonomy, or self-rule. Self-rule is, paradoxically, to be at the mercy of *ourselves*! No, it is *not* a freedom that chants, as they did in Corinth – “I have the right to do anything,”¹⁹ or “I’m free to do whatever I want.” It is, instead, a freedom for *life-in-community*, one in which the old discriminatory barriers of nation, race, class, and gender have been overcome – as I said last week – because we are all coequal “in Christ.”²⁰ It is a freedom *for* love, and Paul says this love is to be embodied in corporate life of the church.²¹ Paradoxically, he says it is a freedom to become *slaves* to one another²²; our freedom is *not* for self-indulgence, rather it is for *mutual* service in love.²³ Note, however, this new slavery is *not* one-sided, self-sacrifice; it’s *reciprocated service*. Paul then implies that this young church needs to realise that squabbling amongst themselves was a sign that they were still enslaved, and if they carried on, it would be the way to self-destruction.²⁴

Now just as earlier Paul has contrasted “Law” and “faith,” so in this passage he presents “Flesh” and “Spirit” as fundamentally opposed.²⁵ But this is a bit confusing. We should *not* be tempted to think that “Flesh” and “Spirit” are some sort of duality competing *within* an individual – between our sinful, lower

¹⁶ See also 1 Thess 1:5; Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 12:3, Gal 3:17,24-25; 4:2-6; Rom 8:1-4.

¹⁷ There are many forms of bondage: political, economic, religious, psychological, spiritual, etc. Freedom from the constraints of the bondage must be freedom *for* a particular purpose - and *not* merely for self-indulgence.

¹⁸ We are part of God’s new eschatological community “in Christ,” *not* a (mythical) “Christian nation.” See also [12].

¹⁹ 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23. Contrast this with Paul’s claim in Gal 2:20. (We therefore must not abuse or cheapen grace; always remember the high cost for our freedom – the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.)

²⁰ Gal 3:26-29. Where freedom is so understood, it leaves room for genuine diversity.

²¹ This is Paul’s closing theme in Gal 5:13-6:10.

²² Gal 5:13 (NRSV); the NIV loses that shocking paradox/irony – “slaves/freedom” - in translation. Paul does *not* say to become slaves of *God* (see Rom 6:15-23) but slaves of *one another*, i.e., through relationships shaped by love.

²³ Gal 5:14 (NRSV/NIV). Paul, curiously, quotes the Law here (Lev 19:18), though “commandment” could be better translated as “saying.” Moreover, “summing up” is different from “fulfilling.” Jesus also makes reference to this summary of the Law [“Love your neighbour as yourself”]; Matt 19:19; 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28. Paul probably knew of this (oral) Jesus tradition and had passed it on.

²⁴ Gal 5:15. See also 1 Cor 3:3.

²⁵ Gal 5:17. I capitalise “Flesh” deliberately (cf. Spirit; while in trinitarian thinking the Spirit is a person, he is also a *power*).

nature and our higher, better self.²⁶ No, for Paul, just as the Spirit of God is within-us-but-not-confined-to-us, so the Flesh also has an *external* reality.²⁷ Consequently, the Flesh here should be seen as a hostile *power*, rather than a human weakness, one that is resident in humans - but not restricted to us - and one that opposes God's powerful Spirit.²⁸ This notion includes out-of-control sexual passions, but Flesh should *not* be understood in only material or physical terms. This is evident in the illustrative list of vices, the *outcomes* of the Flesh, presented in Galatians 5:19-21.²⁹ Yes, this list begins with sexual offences [and excesses] and concludes with self-indulgent partying, yet in the middle are a series of attitudes and qualities that highlight dissension and disunity in the community.³⁰ In other words, Paul's primary concern is on *community-destroying behaviours*. This list is not, as in popular Greek philosophical texts, how to develop a virtuous character and avoid bad habits.³¹ Instead the list functions as a *warning* - that those who follow such practices will *not* inherit the kingdom of God.³² Remember last week, the Jewish agitators were teaching that circumcision was necessary to inherit the kingdom of God. Paul, by contrast, indicates that one is excluded from Abraham's inheritance by these Flesh-driven, community-splitting behaviours!³³

In contrast to the various *outcomes* of the Flesh, the Spirit produces the *fruit* of a *community* characterised by the well-known, gracious qualities listed in Galatians 5:22-23.³⁴ The list begins with "love" and ends with "self-control"; both are important in the context of the attitude and concerns of the agitators.³⁵ Notice Paul is *not* exhorting the Galatians to cultivate this fruit themselves. Rather he is speaking descriptively, or painting a picture, of the harvest that the Holy Spirit produces in the life of the Church! Such fruit *can't* be manufactured by us, they can only grow as *God* gives the growth, in this case by means of the Spirit's life-giving energy.³⁶ And this will look quite different from the fake baubles on a Christmas tree, for the genuine, good fruit is a sign our true, wholesome nature. This doesn't, however, mean this process bypasses our thinking or intentions. That's why at the end Paul urges the Galatians "to keep *in-step* with the Spirit"³⁷ and thereby discover true freedom. Insofar as we walk with

²⁶ In Paul's view, the conflict between the Spirit and the Flesh is not anthropological, not a conflict within a human individual. Rather the opposition is the cosmic conflict between the redemptive power of God and the rebellious fallen creation. This conflict may (partly) play itself out within a divided human self, but it can't be reduced to simply a battle within our mind.

²⁷ Although "Flesh" has been translated as "sinful nature" and "self-indulgence," Paul does *not* use the term Flesh derogatively, as though human bodies were inherently evil.

²⁸ For Paul, "Flesh" is an evil impulse that underlies and empowers human sin and opposes God's desires. (In modern terms, it can be considered a shorthand for self-centered living as opposed to God-centered living.) Nevertheless, Paul is confident as to who will be the ultimate victor in this struggle! (See 1 Cor 15:20-28.) In the meantime, we experience this conflict.

²⁹ These are referred to as "works." There are other "vice lists:" Mark 7:21-22; Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 2 Cor 12:20.

³⁰ Understanding cultural context and practices is critical in appreciating the significance of this list, which includes idolatry.

³¹ Just as in contemporary society, this view of freedom would also sound strange/shocking to Greek ears; for Stoics their ideal was to obtain autonomous detachment, a self-centered existence.

³² Gal 5:21b. Note, unlike the gospels, Paul rarely refers to the *kingdom of God* (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 15:24; 1 Thess 2:12).

³³ Precisely the outcome produced, in Paul's view, by the politics of the circumcision faction!

³⁴ Again, this is an illustrative - not an exhaustive list - see Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:7-14. Both individuals *and* a community can exhibit such virtuous fruits; however, the context here is that of a *community*.

³⁵ In the middle of the sample list of fruit we also find the word "faithfulness." This is no different from the "faithfulness of Christ" (Gal 2:16,20; 3:22); the same Spirit behind the "faithfulness of Christ" is also in church!

³⁶ Gal 5:16, 25; Rom 8:9-11. It is "fruit of the Spirit" after all!

³⁷ Gal 5:25, see also 16 (NIV - "walk" is correct); other translations have "live," continuous action is implied: marching orders!

the Spirit, we *will not* do what the Flesh wants us to do.³⁸ What a radical vision of God's new community in partnership with the Spirit, freed from the guilt-laden demands of the Law! There is both flexibility and freedom - living life with openness towards the unpredictable, liberating movement of God's Spirit. Such liberation can be scary stuff; that's why many prefer - or seek to reduce - this journey of faith to following a set of rules. Paul is not naïve; he knew of the dangers – just re-read his letter to the Corinthian church! But all things considered, Paul saw the dangers of seeking to follow the guidance of the Spirit to be fewer than the dangers of living under the stifling and divisive regulation of the Law.

In summary, Christian freedom doesn't mean we can believe and do what we want. No, life is like a battlefield, with the Flesh and the Spirit opposing one another - so we can never be totally off-guard. What matters, though, is that our identity is that of true children of God, found "in Christ"³⁹ and indwelt by the Spirit. If we are freed *from* the Law then we are free *for* God and free *to* love one another. So let's keep in step with the Spirit!

There is a story told about Abraham Lincoln; unfortunately, it's apocryphal – but it's still a good tale.⁴⁰ One day Lincoln was going past an auction of slaves. As he passed, he saw that there was a beautiful black girl up to be sold. He could see the leering eyes of the white male bidders who were buying this young girl for one reason. Lincoln went into the auction and began to bid. It was not a cheap sale but he outbid them all and bought the girl. As she was given over to him and he paid the money, she looked at him with contempt as she anticipated the terror that she imagined she was bought for. She shouted at him and asked what are you going to do with me now?

"I am going to set you free" he said.

"What do you mean free?" asked the slave. "Free to do what you like!" he said.

"What? Free to *say* what I like?" asked the slave. "Yes!" he answered

"Free to *do* what I like?" asked the slave. "Yes!!" he answered

"Free to *go* where I like?" asked the slave. "Yes!!!" he answered

"Then I would like to go with you!" she replied.

That is what I think Jesus meant when he said: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."⁴¹ He was speaking of himself; we find genuine freedom when we follow him.

Finally, hear the words of St Augustine in context: "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."⁴² Amen. Let us pray.

³⁸ Gal 5:16; This is *not* a command (NRSV) but a *promise* (NIV). Notice also Paul's "So I say. . ."

³⁹ This is signified by baptism, but obviously does not end there.

⁴⁰ From: <http://christianweb.tripod.com/index-3.html>

⁴¹ John 8:32. See also Matt 11:28-30.

⁴² See: <http://wcucatholic.org/all-you-need-is-love/>