

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for June 28: Claim your freedom

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Freedom is as pure and complicated as its opportunities and choices. Like most things in life, freedom can be a blessing or a curse. Freedom is a personal blessing to experience but a curse when wrong choices are made. Wrong choices may be intentional or coincidental. The most serious of challenges is to know what to do with the freedom one has.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines freedom, in the political or constitutional context, as the "absence of necessity, coercion or constraint in choice or action." However, the definition helps us in the spiritual realm. Constitutional freedom is an expression of the higher spirit of grace freedom. Thoughtfully, no one is totally free. The soul always is bound by the body in the way a fish is bound by water. Within the boundaries of the flesh and mind, there is freedom to choose one's personal restraints or restrictions.

Freedom cannot be freedom unless it includes the freedom to fail, sin or rebel. Freedom allows one to choose the forms, structures and character of personal bondage. Within freedom's privileges are the seeds of its own demise. The choice of good and evil is the product of free will as an apple is the product of a seed. The mind and spirit of man have the freedom to see good as the oppressor or evil as the oppressor, and the freedom to defy the higher standards of life. Freedom puts one in the position of choosing to be better or worse.

It can be said that freedom, responsibility and consequences are three

sides of the same coin. The Garden of Eden is the symbol of freedom, the freedom to choose good or evil, freedom to accept restrictions or to experience what is not in one's best interest. Freedom is unlimited choices but must retain the necessity of legal or self-restricting behavior.

Understand your freedom (Galatians 5:1)

Galatians does not focus on constitutional freedom but intrinsic freedom of the mind, spirit and soul, the freedom to choose to live in, for, by and because of Christ. The Apostle Paul understood this freedom was for Christians only. Survival of freedom lies in the spirit and soul of man. Individuals are never without some sense of freedom of mind, attitude, desire and spirit. The person of faith in Christ is to rise above the law, relishing the freedom to live according to the principles of Christ.

Paul states a doctrinal absolute: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." The statement bridges the content of his argument for salvation by faith alone (Galatians 1:1-4:31) with the practical or behavioral section that follows. After arguing from history and Scripture, he capsules the principle into this short, bold phrase. His statement is profound and practical. By nature, mankind is created to be autonomous, independent and self-determining. Christ sets people free to be at their best. The individual cannot control external circumstances but can, in freedom, submit to the control of the Spirit of God.

This freedom is achieved as an act of Christ in that Christ makes us free. The Son gives freedom to the soul, a freedom to which all men are called (v. 13). Christ Jesus, through his free grace, sets people free from the bondage of the law which cannot produce transformation. Christ does for every individual what no set of rules or even principles could do for the human heart.

Paul demonstrates the supremacy of grace over law clearly and definitely.

Accepting the guidance of God that restricts desires brings true personal liberation. The burden of the law works from the attitude of “have to” while the freedom of grace works from the attitude of “want to.” Slaves are bound by others while the free are bound by themselves. Law is negative while grace is positive. Law points out sin while free grace removes sin. Law controls with rules while grace controls with self-discipline. Law binds self-autonomy while grace enhances self-autonomy.

People, without Christ, cannot manage freedom well enough to sustain the best of cultures. Sin, which so easily tempts and attracts, is the spiritual bondage that destroys, producing rebellion and anarchy. Sin makes the law necessary, good and even spiritual.

The key issue remains: law forever is inadequate to transform the heart. Through Christ, the intent of the law is ultimately fulfilled. People find their own freedom through the gift of freedom in Christ. Christ has set the individual free from the guilt of shame, the fear of death, from self-contempt, from purposelessness and hopelessness, but especially the bondage of sin.

Guard your freedom (Galatians 5:1-6)

Aggressively, guard and keep your freedom from legalism and from license, both counterproductive and subversive to true freedom. Paul exhorts the Galatians to “stand firm” tenaciously, and to not waver from the gift and principle of freedom. Freedom is a value worth one’s staunchest support and worthy of one’s life.

Paul and the Galatians had a much deeper understanding of slavery than does the typical person of today. Like the people of Israel, who wanted to return to the bondage of Egypt, slavery could be less complicated, less strenuous and less stressful than living in freedom.

The appeal of living under the law has this same appeal today. Such is the

appeal of fundamentalism of living with hard rules with simple answers rather than dealing with the complicated issues of grace in the context of good versus evil. Paul warns the Galatians not to accept circumcision or the “yoke” of the Jewish legalism, the easy way, but to press on in the rarified air of freedom in Christ.

Practically, in real life there are degrees of freedom and legalism. The temptation, even to the Christian, to resolve selfishness by making more and more laws is strong. Christians, in the American culture, seem to rely more upon democracy and the rule of law, rather than conversion, to change and maintain its Christian values.

For example, we may decry the loss of prayer in public school without reading the Bible and praying at home, or decry the institutions that receive government money used for religious purposes but refuse to tithe or donate to institutions to help them avoid it. In the Christian culture of democratic politics, truth is complicated and most often is practiced somewhere in the middle of the extremes.

However, when it comes to salvation, Christ saves by faith alone and confers a spiritual freedom that makes Christ Lord, first and foremost. Law is useful for guidance and information but only Christ can transform. Once a person is transformed, let him keep guard lest his freedom be subverted by reliance, once again, upon law, tradition, ritual, festivals, rites, baptism, membership, denomination and obedience.

“Falling from grace,” in this context, does not refer to losing one’s salvation. This verse is complicated, given Baptist’s affirmation of the perseverance of the saints.

I suggest we interpret this passage in a different way, in light of the future rather than individual conversion. Should these, who received Christ in genuine conversion, revert back to accepting (in degree or completely)

some of the legal ways of their Jewish heritage (accepting circumcision, festivals, the Torah, etc.), the loss of the principle of salvation by faith alone could be gradually lost and the church in Galatia become nonexistent, irrelevant or so perverted as to lose its spiritual power. This slippage could be dangerous and detrimental.

Perhaps you will agree that many denominations and churches today, rely upon tradition, ritual, legalism, rites, government privileges, etc., rather than the power of Christ to work in the heart through the Holy Spirit. These appear to face a slow, residual, pitiful, painful demise. Programs, personalities and pleasantries prolong the pharisaical phobia.

The church in America is endangered by taking ritual more seriously than faith. This comfortable and convenient attempt at justification is subtle but the outcome is alienation from Christ (v. 4). Traditionalism is an insidious drift into legalism rather than spiritual freedom ("a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough," verse 9). Confidence in good works is the great mental fallacy of the contemporary mind. The distinction between the saved and unsaved, those justified by faith and those who want to be justified by good works, is not as obvious as it should be. To fall out of grace is to squander opportunity and drift back into irrelevance with a salvation that is not salvation at all.

Paul clarifies that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value" (v. 6). By standing firm in freedom, one protects God's gift of faith in Christ from the corruption of good works as a subversive means of salvation.

Express your freedom (Galatians 5:6)

Again, Paul gives us a basic and awesome doctrinal absolute, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (v. 6). This statement is an extremely valuable expression of the Christian life. The process works like this: the love (grace) of God gives the gift of faith to everyone; then,

that same love invokes the response of faith in Christ within the human heart (we love him because he first loved us—1 John 4:19); next, those transformed by faith become the conduit for God's love to others (1 John 4:7-12).

God is the nutrient, hope is the root, faith is the trunk, love is the branch, and loving action is the fruit. God produces in man a loving attitude toward God and neighbor and loving service to all that honors God's work of faith. This simple formula is the kernel of the Christian walk with God. Unless service is done through faith in love, it does not count.

Trust your freedom (Galatians 5:7-12)

The Galatians were doing a commendable job until the Judaizers confronted them and persuaded them to retreat from the principles of faith and freedom. Paul expressed confidence the Galatians would, in fact, trust their commitment to the principle of faith alone for salvation and for freedom in Christ and would accept "no other view" (v. 10).

Paul was adamant that going back to the practice of the rite of circumcision, of accepting the Jewish traditions, would negate or abolish the "offense of the cross" (v. 11). He urged them to trust and obey the truth which they had learned from him and experienced themselves.

Paul concludes this section with a strong statement, seemingly contrary to what he has taught. Teaching that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love," he says of these devilish agitators, "I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (v. 12). His righteous indignation comes through loud and clear.

Perhaps, hidden in the statement, was some humor that suggested if circumcision would save them, emasculation would be even more effective as a means to salvation (like saying if sprinkling will save you then why not

go ahead and baptize them). Paul probably was alluding to the priests of Cybele who castrated themselves to receive merit in the mind of their gods. Though we may read this as harsh and unloving, the statement probably had a serious and understandable message to the Galatians.

Understandably upset that these false teachers were seeking to undo the truth and impact of his teaching and work, he responded in a very human way. After all, Paul acknowledged he was not perfect but the very worst of sinners (Romans 7:14-20). It would have been more in line with his missionary spirit if Paul has said, "I wish these agitators would understand the truth of faith alone and receive Christ as their Savior and Lord." But, whom am I to speak for Paul, the apostle. Seriously, it is fair to say that wisdom is absent to know or judge what Paul had in mind when this statement was written.

Live your freedom (Galatians 5:13-15)

Paul turns from his (serious, vengeful or humorous) reaction to the agitators to a more virtuous "call to freedom" saying "do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love" (v. 13). Love is the greatest and necessary expression of our freedom through faith. Love is not optional and any deference from love is sin. Two love principles are to be lived out faithfully.

First, love constrains us in our behavior and purpose. It is abhorrent to the gospel that freedom means a person can live anyway he or she chooses. Paul phrases it this way, "do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature" (v. 13). Love does not and will not allow such a conclusion. The presence of love and absence of rules should not mean a license to live a life of immorality, selfishness and hatefulness. Reality proves that rules do not prevent such a rebellious lifestyle.

For example, read the papers about the growing population of inmates. The

abuse of rules is not tolerated by genuine love. Love for God and neighbor demands a kind of holy and righteous constraint. Christian living without righteous constraints is not acceptable. Love does not mean perfection but is the premier guiding principle that restricts the way we live into a more narrow pattern of morality and Christ-like behavior.

Second, love is selfless and focuses on others. Paul's language is forceful and strong that we are to give our love freely to others and to assume the obligatory responsibility of love. Paul gives the spiritual side of law by asserting that "the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (v. 14). Paul, learning from Christ, blends the old law (Leviticus 19:18) with the new law in Christ, and gives us a principle of faith which has actions of love as its natural fruit.

Paul argues for responsible freedom. Knowing the carnal nature of man, there is a fear that freedom will bring about sins of the flesh, mind and emotions. Paul is clear that freedom does not, will not, must not foster license. Only in conversion, redemption, justification by Christ, can freedom be responsible, even though perfect responsibility is never fully attainable.

If true love is in your heart, you have no issue about loving your neighbor. God's kind of love is not weary of well-doing. Numerous Christians share the emotion of love but not the will of love and disconnect love from compassionate behavior in behalf of one's neighbors. Feelings of compassion are acknowledged while action is out of the ordinary, often delegated to others who are more spiritual and more dedicated.

Love is an act of the will not just a feeling. Love is dutiful in action while intense in character. Love is a guiding principle that motivates acts of service, mercy, hospitality, generosity and sacrifice.

Conclusion

Freedom is not free—not in war, nor Christianity. Freedom in Christ cost

Christ his life through crucifixion, whereby the price of redemption was paid. Likewise, though a free gift, freedom in Christ cost us something. The cost is freely and gladly born bringing satisfaction and meaning to life. This kind of response of love is born in Christ and in mankind when Christ comes to live in the human heart. Love frees individuals for service to others and disciplines the human spirit to live like Christ.