

Text: Galatians 5: 1, 13-26
Title: Law, Freedom, and the Cross (Part 2)
Date: 06.30.19
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Joe Huizenga, Roseland Christian Ministries' pastor/director, writes about graduating from high school and being free. "After 12 years of assignments, detentions, suspensions, and getting up early I was free to go out and live my absolute best life. My parent's let me off the leash."

And so, for the next year Joe worked, went to college, ate out, stayed out, and lived without restraint. He was free to follow every will and whim. He was no longer hemmed in or required to live into the expectations of others; he could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted. He writes:

After 9 months of my new freedom I'd dropped out of 2 colleges. I wasn't exercising or playing any sports. I wasn't accountable to anyone. I had no schedule and no money. I was unchallenged. Out of shape. Disconnected. Depressed. I'd come along way for my freedom. I was free and I was miserable.

Dear friends, I am not sure that any other word in our culture carries more freight than "freedom." We attach all sorts of meanings to the word.

Freedom is the absence of confinement or restraint.

Freedom is an inalienable right ~ given by God and not government.

Freedom is the ability is to buy a gun without restriction or delay.

Freedom is two gay partners sharing life and love as a married couple.

Freedom is a bakery refusing to bake a cake for their wedding.

Freedom is driving away on the last day of school with the windows down and the radio cranking Tom Petty, "Freefalling."

Freedom is what we'll celebrate later this week with brats and fireworks and fighter-plane-fly-overs.

You get the idea. I am not sure that any other word in our culture carries more freight than "freedom." We attach all sorts of meanings to the word. So, what does Paul mean when he writes: "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free." Or, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free."

What does Paul mean by freedom?

What does it mean to be set free by Christ?

Let's get at it this way....

Paul writes to the Galatians ~ who were living under Roman rule and were not free by any stretch of the imagination ~ that circumcision was a symbol of law-keeping as the way to be right with God.

And, according to Paul, by accepting circumcision you were accepting the keeping of the whole law. If any human effort squares things with God then every human effort is required to square things with God. If playing by one rule makes a difference then you have to play by all the rules. If trimming the tip changes the relationship then just go ahead and chop off the whole thing.

Seems a little drastic. But there is a wholesale quality to this. For Paul the restoration of right relationship with God will not be trifled or trivialized by either our flawed or our finest efforts. There is no half stepping; there is no middle ground. Either we are made right with God by what we do or we are made right by the unilateral action of God.

It is Law or grace.

It is you or Christ.

It is all or nothing.

It is tyranny or freedom.

John Stott ~ evangelical Englishman ~ puts it this way:

What Christ has done in liberating us is not so much set our will free from the bondage of sin as to set our conscience free from the guilt of sin. The Christian freedom is freedom of conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with the view to winning the favor of God. It is the freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ.

And, dear friends, that is to say that you are free from trying to prove yourself to God. You are free from every effort at being good enough, or right enough, or holy enough, or Christian enough....

You are free from religion as a vehicle to earn God's favor.

You are free from debt ~ even the debt of gratitude.

You are free not as a right, or an essential human quality, or a subjective feeling, but as objective, ontological fact in the face of God.

You are not guilty before God; you are accepted by God in Christ.

And there is nothing that you can do to add to that. You are flat out free.

Do you experience life that way?

Do you experience life in Christ as freedom?

Do you feel free?

Paul's argument is admittedly a stretch for our modern sensibilities.

This is a gross generalization, but...

But, it seems to me that most of middle America feels fine about their standing with God. We count ourselves as basically good people and any sense of Law is rooted in what makes moral sense to each one of us, so the whole premise of dismantling a religious legal system as a way to be in relationship with God seems antiquated, dim, and tangential. This idea of freedom as liberation from the Law is largely lost on us and our culture.

Maybe there is another way to get at Paul's understanding of freedom.

We live a couple blocks from a series of train tracks. The electric Metra line runs on one of those tracks, Amtrak passenger trains fly by on other tracks, and big Canadian National freight trains lurch and lumber forward on even other tracks. In the quiet of the night I can hear the chug, or the whir, or the whistle of trains on their tracks. And there is a train-watching park a few blocks from our house....

What I've learned in watching trains is that they are free so long as they stay on their tracks. A train that jumps the tracks is "free" of the rails, but no longer free to travel, no longer free to do train things, no longer free to be what it was built to be.

For Joe freedom meant that he was free from restraint. He could do whatever he wanted to do, but eventually he was a train wreck. It would be hard to argue that he was truly free.

Essential to freedom in Christ is that we are free from that which deforms and derails. And we are free, therefore, to be who we were created to be. I think New York Times columnist David Brooks is helpful here:

In our culture we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. That's freedom from. But there is another and higher kind of freedom. That is freedom to. This is the freedom as fullness of capacity, and it often involves restriction and restraint.

You have to chain yourself to the piano and practice for year after year if you want to have the freedom to really play. You have to chain yourself to a certain set of virtuous habits so you don't become a slave to your destructive desires - the desire for alcohol, the desire for approval, the desire to lie in bed all day....

I suggested last week, using the language that Paul provided in chapter 4, that the Law hemmed us in, confined us, and served as a tutor or babysitter until Christ came. Rightly, some of you pushed back and noted that I left out the positive functions of the Law, and that in fact I was doing a disservice to Judaism and the way in which the Law was grace in and of itself. And, rightly, there is an undeniable beauty to the Law as an expression of God's way and will in this world.

Which is why it's helpful to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and not the destruction of the Law. Jesus is the embodiment of the Law. Jesus is what the way and will of God looks like. Jesus is the what the "fruit of the Spirit" looks like in the flesh....

Paul doesn't replace the Law with unrestrained-hog-buck-wild-do-whatever-you-want-license. Paul proclaims that we are free from the Law but that in Christ we are "in step with the Spirit." We are free to be who we were created to be ~ marked by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." In 1520 Martin Luther wrote a pamphlet, "The Freedom of a Christian" that was addressed to Pope Leo X. There is no evidence that the Pope ever got the little booklet,

but maybe more than anything else that Luther wrote, “The Freedom of the Christian” shaped the way that we (Protestants) have come to understand our relationship with God.

Early on in that treatise Luther writes:

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.

By that Luther means that because of God’s acting in Christ we are absolutely free from the bondage of the law. We don’t have to do anything. But, because of God’s activity in Christ we are bound to serve God and serve neighbor, to love God and love neighbor.

We are free from Law; we are free for love.

We are free from self; we are free for others.

We are free from religion; we are free for the Kingdom.

We are free from distortion; we are free to be who we were created to be.

We are free to ride the rails.

We are free in the Spirit to bear fruit.

We are free to love.

Eugene Peterson penned a modern translation of the New Testament and the Psalms. As best he could he stuck to the intention of the original text but with a contemporary conversational quality. He translates the heart of our text this way:

It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit.... And what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.