**Galatians 5:1,13-25** June 19, 2016

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*[Selected verses]*

 *Galatians 5:1It 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, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself”… 16So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17For 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… 22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

**FREEDOM!**

Dear Friends In Christ,

 Fathers, what are your hopes for your children? I’m not talking about today or tomorrow. I’m talking big picture. When you were taking care of that child in the first years, when you were helping the child to achieve in his or her school years, what were you hoping? Fathers, might your hopes sound something like the very first words of our reading? ***“It is for freedom.”*** Might your deepest hopes not be that they are free?

 It’s a bit of a cliché to tell children, “You can be the president of the United States if you want.” It might be true in a sense, but we don’t really mean it. What we mean is that we want a child to have a sense that they are free, free to achieve, free to choose. One of the greatest gifts we can give them is freedom.

 Maybe this is best illustrated by a negative example. I remember a few years ago listening to an interview of one of the “untouchables” in India. The “untouchables” are the lowest class of society who, to our eyes, are looked at as less than human. The interview was with a mother. She recounted many sad things: the shame, the insults. But what brought her to tears was that she could not give her child freedom from being an “untouchable”. She had given birth to a child who could never rise above that “untouchable” status. If your child could never be anything but an untouchable because of who you, the parent, are. Would you not, at times, wonder if you were not a curse to your own child?

**I. Freed by Forgiveness**

 Every parent’s dream is to give a child freedom.

 When Christ paid for our sins on the cross, and when God’s Holy Spirit put faith in Jesus in our hearts, we were given spiritual birth. At that point Galatians 5:1 reports, ***“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”*** Jesus died on a cross to give us what every parent most wishes to give to their child, freedom.

 Back among the believers in the region of Galatia, some people said that they must keep God’s laws to be saved, especially the Old Testament laws. “Remmeber the law about not working on the Sabbath? Keep it. Remember the laws prohibiting the fatty part of meat, or any pork? Keep it. Jesus may have died for you, but you have to do your part to get to heaven!”

 In our day it is still there. It sounds a little different. But this is how it sounds: “I just try to do what God wants.” Most people think they are pleasing to God, because of what they do for God. Every non-Christian religion in the world is that same religion of works. In that religion there are two types of people, the scared and the proud.

 The scared know that they fall short of God’s measure of perfection—and they are right. They hope that maybe they can store up a pile of good deeds that might offset the bad things they have thought, said and done. They are the scared. And then there are the proud. These people think they are doing pretty good by God, and they are completely wrong, because God himself says, *“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking the whole law”* (James 2:10).

 But Christians are not proud, because we know we are sinners. And we are not scared, because we know are forgiven. Christ’s great joy in suffering for us, in dying for us, was that he rescued us from the vicious cycle of slavery to sin and fear of a righteous God. He has set us free so that we might truly have freedom! Thanks be to Jesus for giving that to us.

**II. Free to Serve Others**

 ***“But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature”*** (13). “So Pastor, you say that I am free. And then the first thing you do is give me rules. You’re talking out of both sides of your mouth.” I am aware of that.

 Let’s think of it this way. What is a sign of a strong relationship? Freedom. In human relationships, whether parent to child, or husband to wife, or friend to friend, freedom is a sure sign/symptom of a strong relationship. There can be other signs, but one of the surest signs of a strong relationship between two people is when one person gives the other freedom. A sure sign of weak, dysfunctional relationship is when there is a controlling impulse. When person A doesn’t like person B going out and doing things on their own, it shows a weak relationship, a lack of trust. In such a relationship love exists only in small measured doses.

 But Christ bought us with his own blood to give us freedom. His great desire is to give us freedom from sin, from guilt. He gave us freedom to live. True freedom is a freedom even to ruin the relationship. Yes, as horrible as that sounds, that is really what true freedom consists in. Freedom means that we could—not to say that we would or that we should or that we should even think about it—but true freedom even allows someone to do the unthinkable and destroy the relationship. Yes, true freedom gives children the freedom to disgrace their parents. And true freedom gives a spouse the freedom to be unfaithful. If there is not opportunity for betraying that relationship, there is actually no freedom. The strength of that relationship is proved by a person who resists all temptations to betray that relationship. That does not, and I must stress this point, it does not make it right to betray that relationship. But the possibility of that, and the choice not to do so demonstrate a strong and true relationship. That person chooses to be faithful, to be obedient, to be kind, considerate, caring, patient, concerned and even more – rather than betray the relationship is what proves the beauty, the strength and the freedom of that relationship.

 And that is what Christ gives us in bringing us to faith. And so it is that we read, ***“You, my brothers, were called to be free.”*** And then, ***“But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”***

 Now we *can*, like an ungrateful child, a traitorous friend or an unfaithful spouse, we can use that freedom to sin. But a truly loving relationship does not ask, “What do I get out of this?” That is a sign of a parasitic relationship— think ticks and leaches here. Instead a Christian relationship asks, “What can I give to the other person in this relationship?”

 The Christian’s response to Jesus’ great freedom giving sacrifice on the cross is, “How can I do that for other people? How can I give them life? How can I give them hope? How can I take the fear out of their lives? How can I give them, and assure them of God’s favor?”

**III. Guidance in Freedom**

 So how are you doing? Is that how you look at people? “What can I do for them?” Is that how you look at your family, your church family, your co-workers? All of the time? Is that also how you look at the grouchy customer service rep who messes up your health insurance claim? Is that how you look at the neighbor who makes lots of noise early in the morning or late at night? Is that how you look at the criminal who ruined the life of your best friend?

 The reason we cannot say that we have done all that Christ wanted us to do with our freedom is that, there is a feud going on inside of us.

 It’s not unlike politics these days. Now I am not making a political point here. I just want to be clear on that. I am merely commenting on the nature of politics. In our country we have two dominant political parties. And it seems to be imprinted in the DNA of each party to disagree with the other. If party R one day says the sky is blue, party D will insist that the sky is pink. If one morning, party D should wake up and say, “Yes, the sky is blue.” Party R will insist, “No, the sky actually isn’t blue, it is green.” It’s like they have some sort of pact to never agree with each other.

 Something like that is going on inside of every single Christian. ***“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.”*** (17). If you are honest enough to admit your sins to God, and if you wonder why you don’t do the good you wish you would do, here it is.

 When we came to faith, God’s Holy Spirit took up residence in our hearts. But our sinful nature will inhere until our last moment, like a permanent marker on a piece of fabric. Oh, sure, you can look up “Hints from Heloise” and partially erase the marker. After years the residue becomes less and less and maybe will even vanish from sight. But even if it vanishes, if you were to take a microscope, you would still see the stain. Similarly our sinful nature inheres in us. By the strength of the Spirit, it may become less and less. But on this side of the grave it will never disappear.

 Being a Christian is an “already/not yet” sort of thing. We have already been forgiven by Christ. The Holy Spirit already lives in us. We already have a promissory note for heaven. *But* we have not yet been purified of all the sin that sticks us. Already/Not Yet.

 That is why in the Lord’s Prayer we pray, *“Lead me not into temptation.”* The inhering sinful nature is always drawn to temptation. It is only because of the Holy Spirit living in us, and by Spirit-given power that we can refuse temptations. Even after years of dealing with temptations, even after promising ourselves never to fall into those temptations again, even after suffering the penalties and shame of sin, we still give into them. Lord, strengthen your Spirit inside each of us!

 To that end, God’s Word guides us. Here, I would encourage you to look in your bulletins at the Epistle reading, in verse 19, ***“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 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”*** (19-21). A veritable laundry list. It could be much longer. But all of these have something in common. Every single sin is selfish and self-centered. Look again, ***“Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.”*** Selfish.

 Now look at the other list: ***“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”*** Here there is no selfishness, no self. It is all about God and other people.

 Before faith in Christ, there was no freedom. We could only do what our sinful natures prompted us to do. By the Holy Spirit, we can now choose to do what is right. It’s like we have been freed from an addiction. That which destroys life, poisons relationships, fogs the mind, and ends in death, we have been freed from that by Christ Jesus. He has given us freedom. Praise be to Jesus. May we, by the Holy Spirit living in us, live lives worthy of what he has done for us! Amen.