

“Freedom in Christ”

I Samuel 8:10-18; Galatians 5:1

July 2, 2023

Over the last several years, it's become fashionable to decry the failures of the United States of America. That's not terribly hard to do. Just like any nation filled with broken sinners, there are bound to be things which demonstrate that depraved nature we all harbor within us. Sadly overlooked in this headlong rush to burn down the form of government begun this day in 1776, is that there is something so essentially wonderful about America. It resonates within not only our hearts this morning, but it also rings in places around the world where freedom isn't a realizable commodity.

What is wonderful is simply this – freedom! It shouldn't surprise us that freedom from governmental overreach was part of the DNA of the Founding Fathers. Where did this dominant emphasis on freedom find its source. What were the headwaters from which the Founders were sipping? The answer is, very clearly, that they many of them were well-steeped in the knowledge of the Word. There, in Galatians 5:1 we hear the first echo of freedom – ***“It is for freedom Christ set you free.”***

But it's more than that. Stretching back all the way into the Book of First Samuel, we hear the perils of tyranny. You see, the people of God were struggling. Following their own ways and not the Lord's had seen them encounter difficult with surrounding nations. In light of these struggles, the people fashioned what they thought would be a great solution. A king who could bring with him a government and an army. Ah, but God instructed Samuel to tell the people this in I Samuel 8:10-18: *“So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’”*

What God knows is that humanity is fallen, broken by the power of sin. As such any government will be entirely made up of, you guessed it, people who are themselves, deeply flawed. Armed with the power of coercive force, a government always falls prey to the inescapable human dynamic articulated by Lord Acton, not Machiavelli as many people assume. The historian and moralist, who was otherwise known simply as Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

Jesus Christ came bringing a new kind of freedom. One that was far more precious than freedom from the Romans. Jesus Christ came to liberate us from our two worst enemies. Jesus Christ became human and died upon a cross to free us from sin and death. And it points to the very heart of God's nature that such a thing simply had to be done because as His creation, we need to be free. God alone created us. He made us in His image. If He'd wanted to, God could've designed us to be mere puppets, programmed to do precisely what He wished. But God didn't do that. Instead, He created us to bear His image. And you see, God is utterly and completely free to do anything He'd like. Being fashioned in His image means that we should, as humans, always breathe free. Freedom is stitched into every fiber of our existence for no other reason than we are utterly God's creation.

But as we're all painfully aware, something happened which warped us, stripped us of our freedom. Being God's good creation, not puppets but free in every regard, we chose to sin. Sewing our oats, we used our freedom to flaunt God's sole prohibition in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve partook of that bitter fruit. From that point forward until Jesus Christ, we were no longer really free. We were held in slavery by sin. Sin distorts us to the point where we can no longer, of our own accord, will ourselves to do right. John Calvin calls this total depravity. St. Augustine, generations before called it the brokenness of our free-will. By this he meant that our wills are no longer FREE because apart from God, we'll always do the very things which distort God's image within us.

But Jesus Christ changed the dynamic. Christ came and unleashed us from the captivity of sin. He

freed us from bondage to anything and everything. Any power that tries to exert a hold over us no longer has the means to do so. *“For Freedom, Christ has set us free.”* And yet the history of our Christian lives illuminates a different picture, doesn’t it? Freed from sin, we still find ourselves longing for our old ways or our familiar vices. It’s the reason, as Paul writes in Romans, that we can know the good and yet in the very same moment choose not to do it.

And it shouldn’t surprise us really. The Bible shows us how quickly God’s people find themselves gravitating back to their former ways. We either take Christ’s freedom and try to NEGATE it by binding ourselves in fear to rules and regulations, or we think that we can do anything we’d like, whenever we’d like. As they say, old habits die hard.

Just look at our reading from Exodus. Less than two months removed from the miraculous parting of the water, the mud of the Red Sea floor still caked on their feet, the Jewish people desire nothing more than to return to their lives in slavery. Exodus 16:3 – *“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate our fill of bread.”* Can you imagine that? To be free and then to complain that it was better being a slave?

The one single necessary act for our freedom was accomplished by Jesus Christ. Christ’s atoning death cut us free from the demands of the law. He took upon Himself all our sins so that we might be forever emancipated from the need to atone for them, thus preparing the way for us into eternal life. Sadly though, a familiar hell is somehow always more preferable to us than an unknown paradise and sometimes we find ourselves back in bondage through the strangest of means. We find our way back into slavery to sin by abusing the very freedoms God gave us.

And again, we see Scriptural parallels. You see, it wasn’t only those ancient Jews who exhibit the same ingratitude. The people of God did this in the Old Testament over and over again. They took their election as God’s people as a permit to do whatever they pleased. God sent prophets to correct the people of this notion, often to little avail.

St. Paul preaches against the same dynamic, telling the Corinthian Christians that the emancipation Christ shared with them isn’t a freedom to simply just do whatever feels good, expecting God’s forgiveness. Given freedom, sometimes people seek the comfort of bondage for no other reason than its familiar. And it’s unfortunate that there are all too many pastors and denominations which meet this need. They say things like “if you do this or act like that, then everyone knows you’re going to h-e-double hockey sticks.” They look out and see an ocean of damned people that they need to save by scaring them into doing things. Rules are preached as the keys to the kingdom, not Christ alone and Him Crucified. These people ignore their freedom and make their way back into the slavery.

I’ve told y’all this before but the primary reason people don’t come to church is that they’ve been rubbed wrong by church members. One of the chief means we do this is by trying to be the morality police for others. By looking down on people wandering in sin, we not only miss the opportunity to free them from darkness, we ALSO turn people off from ever coming in the doors. Probably the worst thing about Christianity is its tendency to create dour prudism.

Once when I was on a Kairos walk, I met a young man with an amazing gift – a mental palate that would put Auguste Escofier to shame. I mean this kid could take the most meager ingredients and the least amount of access to kitchen equipment and create truly wonderful flavors. A smart young man despite his location, he shared with me the reason why he was so apathetic towards Christianity. You see, living down in Georgetown South Carolina, there wasn’t much to do, not for a young man whose mom worked hard making a way for them as a manager at Popeye’s. That’s not to excuse what he ends up doing, it’s merely to put it into perspective. One day, this young man and his friends get caught robbing a store. They get caught. His mom, fearing for her son’s well-being, makes what she’s sure is the right decision. This young man NEEDS Jesus so, what does she do? She takes him to church. Good idea, right? Not so much. That particular morning, the pastor, unaware that any of the perpetrators of this robbery were in the sanctuary, decries the “awful” young men who robbed this store. Here was a young man looking for the Gospel and what he got was a hard measure of getting his face rubbed in his own mess.

Sadly, although not this dramatic, we do that to a lot of people. Yes, Christians are supposed to be moral, living as Holy a life possible by the Spirit’s power. But sometimes we place the emphasis so much on that, we lose sight of the fact that we’re sinners ourselves.

Please hear me – In Christ, we are truly free. Free to do whatever it is that we wish with the sure

knowledge that it is our faith in Jesus (which was given to us by God) that ensures our salvation, not our actions. Technically, that means that our salvation is independent of our behavior. Friends hear the good news of the Gospel, in Jesus Christ you are truly and completely free. Free, one might say, even to sin. “BUT WAIT!” you might be thinking. “If it doesn’t matter what I do, I just have to believe in Jesus to get into heaven. Why am I here on Sunday?”

Good questions. Fair ones. I believe it was F. Scott Fitzgerald who once said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” I would tweak that statement just a bit. As another axiom, the test of a God-given faith is the ability to hold the knowledge of the freedom we have in Christ up against the need for Christians to seek holiness. We are free to sin but by the Spirit’s power, we do not wander down those dark roads ever again.

Unfortunately, many hear about Christian freedom and take it in the opposite but equally wrong direction. They’ve taken the freedom Christ gives us from sin to mean they’re free to do what they’d like. “If Christ really takes away all our sins,” they think “then we’re free to do and say and act any way I’d like. Everything’s okay because we’re freed from punishment by God’s grace.” Sadly, there are several denominations that cater to this outlook. Perhaps even our own. The Gospel is merely a means to your personal fulfillment, they say. Take what you like and leave the rest. “You’re free to be who you want to be. Do whatever feels good to you no matter what the Bible says – God loves you nonetheless.”

But we see the effects of this false understanding of Christian freedom. In a complete turnaround from a generation ago, we see the same rates of divorce, infidelity, sex outside of marriage and dishonesty within Christian communities as with secular culture. We’ve taken the freedom for which Christ gave His life and we’ve used it as a means justify our sin.

Paul deals with this directly and clearly in Romans. There, Paul comes against this understanding of Christian freedom. In Romans 6:1-4 he writes, *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* Christian freedom isn’t a license to do whatever we’d like. Friends, Christ’s freedom doesn’t call us to lapse back into legalism nor does Christian freedom mean that we have liberty to engage in unethical, immoral, perverse behavior citing God’s grace as the justification to do so.

So, it begs the question – What does Paul mean when he writes *“for freedom, Christ has set you free?”* Paul gives us the key to understanding this verse later on in the chapter where he writes in Galatians 6:13-16: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Freedom in Christ is a fervent love for our neighbor which flows from faith in the liberating and redeeming love of our Lord. True freedom is freedom for, not a freedom from, the law. And in that freedom, we find ourselves more fulfilled than we’ve ever been before. And it’s because God is leading us closer and closer to being the very people He created us to be. Back towards reflecting His image which is stitched into every one of us.

Once, when I was working as a chef, I dropped something heavy on my foot. Well, I had to keep working, so I adjusted how I walked. By turning my foot slightly inward, I was able to avoid the pain in my foot. Oh, but by the end of that evening, I HURT. Only it wasn’t my foot so much. It was my back. You see, when we don’t function the way we were designed, things get out of whack and soon we’re feeling the pain. But when God’s sets us to right, when we’re led away from sin, into the irrepressible light of Christ, we change...for the better!

That’s kind of what Christian freedom is like. When we find ourselves loving our neighbor and being faithful to God, it just feels right. And it should, those are the very tasks God created for us to enjoy.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.