

It's been 249 years since the founders of our nation signed a document which continues to shape the course of history. On the 4th of July, the Continental Congress gathered together to put their signatures on the Declaration of Independence. In it, we find words many of us memorized in grade school. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights-that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In composing these words and fighting with England, What the Founders of this nation were after was freedom – The freedom to govern themselves and no longer be held accountable to a foreign king. The Declaration of Independence breathed life into a country already engaged in war. The young nation was founded this weekend upon a principal which, in every age, across thousands of years, people have hoped for.

The desire for freedom didn't begin with the Declaration of Independence. It just seems to be woven into the fabric of human life that we all yearn to "breathe free."

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson put pen to paper, the Hebrew people longed for freedom in Egypt. God sent a man named Moses. While Pharaoh wished to keep God's people in slavery, Moses stood up and said (I won't sing it to you) "Let my people GO."

Fast forward another thousand years and we'll find the Jewish people yet again enslaved under a tyrannous ruler. This time it's the Roman Empire as well as all those other powers and principalities as Paul calls them that kept God's people shackled. Yet again, God acted to liberate his people by sending Jesus Christ into the world. In his very first sermon, Jesus announced his mission "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free."

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 why we all sometimes believe we have to earn our way into heaven. 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 consider 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. "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread."

Paul saw the same dynamic in effect in the churches of Galatia.

In perhaps Paul's least irenic letter, he cries out against the Galatians. He even goes so far as to call them one dogs at one point in the letter, calling for castrations in today's reading. The reason he's so mad is that a false Gospel was being proclaimed to the people of Galatia. This warped gospel made baptism a subordinate ritual to maintaining the Jewish laws. In other words, you got

baptized so that you could be circumcised. To Paul's mind, this was a gateway back into legalism and law abidance. If you failed to adhere to the Torah laws, you'd bring about God's wrath.

In Paul's opinion, this was of a practice of Christianity which would render Christ's death on the Cross useless. *And you see, Paul knew the power that God unleashed there on Cavalry. The power was freedom.*

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.

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.

I think here in America, many of us are caught in two strangely familiar predicaments when it comes to Christian freedom.

On the one hand, we've got so many folks who are trying to earn their way into heaven. Feeling uncertain about their salvation, they work their hands to the bone trying desperately to appease what they perceive as an angry and vengeful God. They've run away from Christian freedom, just like the Hebrew people, just like the Galatians.

I'm reminded in this of a story that made the news several years ago. It was a rather sad story about a man who'd spent the better part of 20 years in prison. But then, one day, the parole board told him he was free to go, that his term was served, his debt to society paid in full. Within a week, that man was arrested while trying to rob a bank.

Well, he wasn't really trying to rob a bank as it would turn out.

The bank teller he tried to rob told reporters afterwards that he actually instructed her to hit the silent alarm BEFORE giving him cash. Then he told her he would simply wait in the bank's lobby until the police could arrive to arrest him.

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. Obedience to rules is 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.

Still others hear of Christian freedom and take it in the opposite but equally wrong direction. They've taken the freedom Christ gives us 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. 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.

In 1st Corinthians and in Romans and here in Galatians, Paul comes against this understanding of Christian freedom. In Romans 6 he writes "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!"

Christian freedom isn't a license to do whatever we'd like.

Do y'all remember that movie, "Home Alone?" As you may well recall, through a plot contrivance only possible in Hollywood, an entire family leaves for a vacation to Europe sadly leaving behind their youngest child. For a while there, he basks in his freedom. He eats what he wants, watches what he wants. But do you remember how he's feeling towards the end of the movie. He's sad and lonely. He misses his parents, he even misses eating vegetables and having rules to follow. Somehow, his understanding of what freedom offered him was insufficient.

I think this is what's going on in so many Christian quarters these days. We've seemingly been liberated from ethics and morality and decency and we're finding it not to quite be the cup of tea we wanted. We long for something different, something better.

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 “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.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes “True freedom is faith working through love, on account of love. For it's only because of Christ and his liberating and redeeming love that we're free from the punishments of the law. This newly found freedom is immediately translated into freedom for the law of love. Since you are freed from wrath, you actually delight in the law of love, and this delight is manifest in faith and love: *faith toward God and fervent love toward neighbor.*”

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.

Have y'all ever tried using the wrong tool to try to accomplish a task? Like for example, using a screwdriver to try to drive a nail or a serrated knife to bone a chicken. It works, barely, but it never feels right, does it? Then, later on, you find yourself using the right tool for the same job, a hammer or a sharpened boning knife and then it's easy. It feels right and good.

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.

But I admit, to outside eyes, a Christian's life might appear to be the most restrained form of lifestyle imaginable. There are rules we follow, not because we HAVE to, but because we WANT to. We surrender our time and our money and our energies and offer them lovingly to our neighbors in the name of Jesus Christ. To the outsider looking in, it might even appear to be the very OPPOSITE of freedom. After all, there's a lot to do and accomplish.

I think I've been here long enough that y'all know I'm not perfect. Today I'd like to share with you a little bit of my testimony, not so much because I think I'm the ideal Christian, but because I love the topic of Christian freedom.

I talked to one of my friends who's a bit of an agnostic at lunch right around Easter. I hadn't seen him in many years so he had lots of questions about my life as a pastor and as a father.

"Do you have to do funerals?" he wondered.

"You probably didn't get much sleep when Ben and Lillian were little, did you?"

On and on this litany of questions went. Each one was directed at some aspect of life where I have responsibilities or duties or rules to follow. Each time I answered, yes, his mouth gaped a little wider.

Finally, my friend declared something like this – "With all that you've got to do, I can't understand how you don't go crazy. It seems like you'd never get any time for yourself, let alone have any fun."

I shared with him the gist of what I testify to you now.

25 years ago I had the freedom to do and say and go where I'd like. Every day was spent seeking my own best interest. I did what I wanted, when I wanted to and not a moment before. I was accountable to no one, save my boss at work.

But you know what, I was miserable. I was restless, irritable and discontent.

These days I don't get as much time for myself as I'd like. There's always something that I need to do or someone I need to visit and at the end of the day, there's always a kid to chat with and dinner to fix.

But you know what, *I've never been happier in my entire life.*

That's what Christian freedom means to me!

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