

July 29, 2007

“Freedom: Guarding Against Its Misuse”
Galatians 5:13-15

FCF: Misuse of our freedom in Christ

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Having been called to “freedom,”
(magnet) we must not fall into a bondage of license.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Not knowing the value of what you’ve been given, you will use it in a cheapening way. Why, after all, do we hear the stories of athletes with unimaginable physical skill throwing away their opportunities? Of archeologists telling of precious artifacts being treated as common household objects? Of computer gurus creating the latest virus?

Not knowing the value of what you’ve been given, you will use it in a cheapening way. Why, after all, do we hear of people, moved by the news of God’s grace and the assurance of being right with Him by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, flaunting their newfound freedom before God and one another? Could we slip into that?

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 5:13-15

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Freedom comes in many forms. Some clamor for a free-market economy for free trade and free enterprise. President Roosevelt spoke of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Sadly, most think of freedom today as an utter lack of constraints, insisting upon their rights. “It’s a free country!” they say.

The Scriptures speak of freedom differently and far more deeply – a freedom of conscience, a freedom from the burden of guilt and sin, a freedom of acceptance by God, and a freedom to approach Him without fear. This has been the message of Paul’s letter to the Galatians thus far (**READ Galatians 5:13a**). He has said it loudly, clearly, and repeatedly. But, like so many biblical doctrines, this too is prone to be misunderstood when heard in isolation. Things are often juxtaposed in the Bible, set side by side, without being harmonized or synthesized. One God in three persons. One Savior with two natures. Sovereign election and human freedom. And here, salvation by grace alone and the obligation of obedience. Preach the second alone, focusing on God’s commands, and people fall into legalism, thinking they must obey to please. Preach the first alone, focusing on God’s love, and people fall into license, thinking they can live as they please.

The Lord, in His wisdom, knows His people need to hear both sides. At times, depending on the situation, one may need to be emphasized. Here, given the nature of the controversy in the Galatian church, Paul has emphasized salvation and justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But, that said, he now provides a guardrail lest they and we slide too far to the other side. Having been called to freedom, we must not fall back into the bondage of legalism. Absolutely. But also, it is equally true that, having been called to freedom, we must not fall into the bondage of license.

I. REGARDING OURSELVES

First, a bondage of license regarding ourselves (**READ Galatians 5:13a-b**).

A) Not to Indulge Ourselves

For what have we been set free? To indulge ourselves? Hardly.

1. The flesh

Paul speaks here of the need not to indulge “the flesh.” Meaning not the “sinful body” but the “sinful nature” – inherited and twisted, prone and given to sin and self.

2. The opportunity

To that we are not give “an opportunity.” Literally, to not give, in a military sense, a base of operations from which to attack. Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.

B) But to Control Ourselves

Rather, instead of freedom to indulge ourselves, we’re freed to control ourselves.

1. The real freedom

This is the real freedom we were created and redeemed for – freedom from sin not freedom to sin. Liberty to approach God but not to then wallow in our selfishness.

2. The real bondage

The real bondage is to be enslaved to our desires or appetites. And Christ has set us free.

Illustration:

Think of dogs and antifreeze. There is something attractive there to a dog – smell or taste. But poisonous as well. They are free to drink it. But compelled to drink it as well. And free to die as a result. Is that freedom? No. That is enslavement to desire.

Christ has come to set us free from the tyranny of these appetites and desires.

Application:

The freedom God offers to us in the gospel is a freedom that delivers us from the cell block of self-indulgence out into the green pasture of self-control. The gospel is a glorious story with a promise. The story of who and what we were made for, what has gone wrong, and the coming of a Redeemer promising to set us free and make us right.

All that is to say that having been called to freedom and all that entails, we must not and need not fall into license. For Christ has set us free – even from ourselves.

II. REGARDING OTHERS

But this freedom goes deeper – from license in regards to others as well (**READ Galatians 5:13**). In Christ, we have the freedom to approach God without fear but not to engage our neighbor without love. We are freed in relation to God but not one another.

A) Not to Exploit Others

1. Not serving oneself

Freed not to exploit others, not to serve oneself – the implicit message of v.13b.

2. Not destroying one another

Freed not to destroy one another – the graphic imagery of v.15 (**READ Galatians 5:15**).

B) But to Serve Others

We’ve been freed not exploit others but to serve others.

1. The real freedom

The irony being true freedom is a new form of slavery – to others’ needs over our own.

2. The real bondage

But that is freedom. Bondage is when you feel so empty you must take, steal from others in order to be filled. In Christ, I am set free not to take for myself but to give of myself.

Paul says it so clearly here. The law is summarized by love. And love is expressed in obedience to the law. They are two sides to the same coin. Inseparable.

Application:

Martin Luther said (**READ quote**), “*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*” This is a call into deliverance. That said, we need to recognize, as we move out of legalism, it will be at a different pace for each of us in different areas. Such was the case in the 1st and the 21st century church. What then does love demand as we wrestle with how to regard certain matters of freedom? Ask yourself, “Is the exercise of my freedom contributing to

the spiritual growth of my brother or sister?” “Have I made peace and mutual building-up the aim of my exercise of freedom?” “Do I need to exercise my freedom in order to possess it?” “What does it mean to love?” “What does it mean to fulfill the law?”

III. REGARDING GOD

Which takes us to the third arena – avoiding license regarding God. Is God concerned with our obedience? Has His will for us changed? (READ Galatians 5:14)

A) Not to Disregard His Law

Listen. We have not been freed by the grace of God to disregard the law of God.

1. Thinking He is unconcerned with our obedience

It is simply not true He is unconcerned with our obedience.

2. Thinking His will for us has changed

It is simply not true His will for us has changed. He has not changed. Nor has His Word.

B) But to Fulfill His Law

We have not been freed by the grace of God to disregard the law of God. Rather, we have been freed to finally fulfill it. Listen to the psalmist (READ Psalm 1:1-4).

1. The real freedom

Real freedom is knowing our being accepted by God does not depend in any way upon our obedience to His law. And now, having been accepted, we are truly and finally free to keep His law out of love for Him and enablement by His Spirit. That's freedom.

2. The real bondage

Bondage comes in seeing the law as a means of being saved or justified before God. The most the law can do for us, before we come to Christ, is to show us our sin. But after we come to Christ, the law then shows us how to live for Him. Bondage comes in seeing His commands as having no bearing on us now and then charting our own course and way.

Christ has set us free and shown us what it means to put the law in its place.

Application:

That's been the message throughout Paul's letter – we have to put the law in its place. That said, it does have a place. Some of you have heard me say, “The indicative always comes before the imperative.” And that's true. But the imperative is still there. God has never done away with His law. He nor His moral commands have changed.

CONCLUSION:

Having been called to freedom, we must not fall back into a bondage of either legalism or license. A full and true understanding of grace is what keeps all this in balance. Imagine driving on a narrow two-lane highway, cut through a swampland by building up the road bed above the swamp. You have to be especially alert not to drift because there are no rails and no margin for error. If you go off the road, you do not end up resting on a shoulder but submerged in a swamp. Perhaps you've been on such roads. Now envision this. The roadway is the freedom of the gospel allowing us to drive safely through the swamp of legalism and license on each side. Keeping grace in proper focus, you maintain your course. Drifting too far over to the side of God's love and you fall into license. Drifting too far over to the side of God's law and you fall into legalism.

Focusing on grace in all its fullness and you have the way of freedom. This is, as I said earlier, the greatest story. He has saved us from so much. And it holds out the greatest promise. For He has saved us for so much as well. May He enable us all the more to keep our way straight with hearts captured by the fullness of His grace.

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