

**Our Freedom in Christ**  
Grace Chapel, August 28, 2022

Today's Scripture lesson is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, Chapter 5:

**5 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ...**

**<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup> But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.**

**<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions (party spirit), <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. ...**

**<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another. (RSV)**

Galatia was a province of the Roman Empire located in what is now called "Asia Minor," modern-day Asiatic Turkey. In fact, the capitol of Turkey, Ankara, is located in the northern part of what was then Galatia. Ethnically, the Galatians were a Celtic people, brought into Asia Minor as mercenaries by king Nicomedes of Bithynia in 287 B.C. The king later released them without paying, so they had no way to go home to Europe. They revolted, and set up their own kingdom, which was later absorbed by the growing Roman Empire. Those were the northern Galatians. But the Roman province "Galatia" included cities in the south that were more Greek in culture. We don't know for sure if Paul started churches in those northern parts of the province. Luke, in Acts, documents Paul's visits to three cities in the southern part: Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Paul's letter to the Galatians may well have been to people of his churches in those cities, but also possibly others, within the province of Galatia.

The reason for the letter is this. Paul had established the churches there in Galatia, that included both Jews and Gentiles. Someone later came and told the Gentiles in those churches, that they must convert to Judaism in order to be Christians. That meant undergoing all of the rituals to become a Jew, then obeying all of the Jewish Law. For men, that included Circumcision. Paul was outraged by this. He had recently been to Jerusalem, where the early church leaders had agreed that Gentiles did NOT have to become Jews to be Christians.

Earlier in the letter, Paul explains that one cannot find righteousness entirely by obedience to the Law. He should know. As a Pharisee, he had tried to do just that. In his zeal for enforcing the Law, he had persecuted Christians. Until that day on the road to Damascus, when he was confronted by the living Jesus. Paul's message to the Gentiles became, that salvation is found through faith in Christ Jesus, and in following him, as led by the Holy Spirit. We, as Christians, find righteousness through faith, and the grace of God's forgiveness when we confess our sins. In my own home church, First Presbyterian of Wilkes-Barre, every Sunday we pray for forgiveness. The minister says, "Believe the Good News of the Gospel." then all say aloud, "In Jesus Christ we are Forgiven."

Paul writes, "**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**" He is telling us that Christ has set us free from the slavery of obedience to the Law. He's not speaking of personal freedom. Many Christians of that era were in fact slaves to others. That was common, and remained common, for many centuries afterward. Nor was he talking about political freedom, freedom to self-govern. Monarchies and Empires were the rule. There had been an isolated and brief period of "democracy" among the elites of some Greek city-states. There had been something similar in early Republican Rome. That was now long past. There was no political freedom for individuals in Paul's day.

So, why does Paul reckon commitment to full obedience to the Law as a form of slavery? There are two components to the Law. "Statutes" controlled civil conduct and relationships. The 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," is an example. Similar statutes are needed by any society regardless of religious context. "Ordnances" were the laws concerning religious practice. An example is the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy." The books of the Torah, Exodus through Deuteronomy, are filled with lots of laws of both sorts that Jews were expected to obey. If they didn't, they were "sinners," potentially subject to judicial procedures and punishment.

Furthermore, by the First Century, there were additional oral laws, and traditions of the elders, that interpreted the written laws as they applied to many different issues and circumstances. Jesus was constantly challenging these strict but enforced interpretations. You may recall that when he healed a man's withered arm on the Sabbath, he was considered by the Scribes and Pharisees to have violated the Commandment to do no work on the Sabbath. The "Juda-izers" that had visited Paul's churches would lay the full weight of this understanding of the Law on the new Gentile Christians.

We as modern-day Christians have reached an accommodation on this issue. We look at the Ten Commandments as Laws we ought to obey. Except, we are here worshiping God on Sunday instead of the literal Sabbath, Saturday. We don't keep all of the kosher laws, either. In Paul's time, early Christians were trying to find their way through these issues without all of the help that we find in the New Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament is Paul trying to deal with these issues as they come up, by writing letters, like this one to the Galatians. The words of Jesus, that we have in the Gospel of Mark, and the other, later gospels, had not yet been written down and circulated.

I am reminded of a story told by an early missionary in the Congo. The missionaries brought the gospel to native villages by traveling through the jungle on foot, much like those in Paul's day, to visit or establish native churches. They brought with them also written language, schools, helpful agricultural practices, and medicine.

The Presbyterian missionary Rev. Robert Bedinger tells this story in his book *Triumph of the Gospel in the Belgian Congo*. About 1913, a missionary from the new mission station at Lusambo was making his first trip into the bush to visit native villages in the region. "The missionary discovered church sheds, with daily services being conducted, in fifteen villages. The explanation was that a young [man] lad had visited his relatives near Luluaburg, where he came in contact with a [native] Luebo evangelist. He learned the Ten Commandments and several hymns. He returned to his village and began to teach what he knew. The fire [of the Gospel] spread. Thus, for two years before the missionary appeared, the Spirit had found a way to begin His work of preparation. The nearest village in which this work was going on was sixty miles from Lusambo."

When Paul or others in the First Century traveled about, they couldn't convey everything that we can find in our Bibles today. But what they did convey in words and deeds had power, power through the Holy Spirit, to liberate people from

oppressive systems of belief. Paul would not stand for these recently freed Christians to be subjected to all the minutiae of the Jewish Law.

Now, you may be thinking, “Liberated from obedience to Law? Isn’t that asking for Chaos? Is a lawless society really what we need?” Well, no. Recent protests and civil revolts we’ve seen in our country are somewhat that. Defunding the police was an effort to eliminate the means for enforcing Law, as if that is a good thing. The establishment of “autonomous districts” in some cities didn’t work out well either. Civil society needs laws to protect us all from various sorts of predators. Paul is not disputing this. But many critics of Paul have accused him of just that – promoting licentiousness. Much of our scripture reading deals with this issue, with Paul cautioning against licentiousness.

For Paul, the substitute for being subject to the Jewish Law isn’t lawlessness, but following Christ, and being led by the Holy Spirit. To the Galatians he says, **16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ...**

Later: **18 But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. ...**

And: **22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.**

Paul not only spoke and wrote such things, but he lived them. There are, of course, occasions when Christians must stand for justice. Laws, or their enforcement, are sometimes perverse, such as when Jesus did healing on the Sabbath. We are fortunate that, in this country, such occasions are relatively rare.

What I would like to do now is ask, What about us today? What in our day seeks to enslave us? We live in an age when formal inhibitions are being rejected. We hear themes like, “If it feels good, do it!” Or, “No limits!” But is that the reality? We live in a web of social relationships that are not necessarily written, but real nonetheless. Somewhat like the oral Jewish Law in Jesus’s day. Have you heard things like, “If you are really a friend, you will do what I ask you to do.” Or, “Someone has to do it,” aimed at you. There are still domineering people who would subject others to their will, manipulating conversations and relationships to meet their own ends. There always have been. Sometimes they use law or rules as a lever, sometimes they use norms for relationships, sometimes threats.

As people in our modern world, we are also under more pressure to do things because of the mass of communications. We are constantly bombarded by news of terrible things happening in the world, followed by urgent admonitions to action, most commonly to donate to this cause, or that party, or some web site.

The good news that Paul has for the Galatians, and for us: You are free in the Spirit to reject coercion by others. Our problems and context are different from Paul's Galatians, but we too struggle against burdens that weigh us down, that others lay on us. Paul writes,

**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**

We are free to reject what others would force us to do, where that goes against the Holy Spirit's guidance. That doesn't mean being argumentative or combative. We are to live lives that exhibit love, joy, peace, and the rest of the virtues that go with life in the Spirit. But when someone uses clever words or images to try to control us, we are free to say, "No."

One of the ways this kind of problem can come up, is when someone demands that, as a Christian, we must give them money. I've had that asked of me. "You are not a Christian if you don't give me the \$20 I need to buy this medicine." Perhaps you have been confronted by something like that on occasion. When I was working as a mission in New Orleans for a few months, there was a strict rule: "Don't give anyone money." There were many, many among the people served at that mission, who would ask, or even demand, money. "Give me a dollar!" or something like that. There were well constructed and plausible reasons presented for why I should do so. In one case a man demanded money for bus fare to get across the river where he was to apply for a job. The bridge over the river didn't allow for pedestrians – he couldn't walk there. Well, there was a ferry across the river that was free to pedestrians. He figured I wouldn't know that, and I didn't.

The basic argument is that Jesus says, "Give to whoever asks." And, yes, that's in the Bible. Matthew 5:42: **"Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."**

But, you see, trying to follow everything in the Bible, even just everything Jesus says, can be turned into a form of Law. For situations Jesus doesn't address explicitly, then we ask, "What does Peter, or other early church fathers, say about that?" We can find ourselves chasing obedience to all of those sayings, just as the Jews pursued obedience to all of the Law, originally from Moses, but later interpreted and applied widely and strictly. Then we feel guilty when we may rebel against those who would use those laws, or sayings, or traditions, as a tool to tell us what to do. Our defense is the Holy Spirit. We will be able to tell, in our heart,

what we must do, and what we need not do. Furthermore, even if we err, Jesus stands ready to forgive us. We live by grace. God's grace, not others' approval. Because we live under grace, we can be happy and free of worry about such things.

I may have erred in not giving that man money for his bus fare. But, right or wrong, I could rely on Paul's words to the Romans, and to us. Romans 8:38-39:

**<sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

We also need to remember that not all of those problems of the world have to be our problem. It is God's world. He has many, many faithful followers. Not everybody has to fight every battle. The Holy Spirit is there to give us guidance, and lead us where God may need us to go. We cannot let all the cares of the world paralyze us, imprisoning us in depression, another form of bondage.

The life in the Spirit, while expressed a bit differently, was understood and envisioned in Old Testament times, by the Prophet Jeremiah. We as Christians see Jeremiah 31:31-34 as looking forward to the New Testament. Jeremiah tells us:

**<sup>31</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."**

This is what Paul wants for his Galatian Christians. And for us, of the Christian community, of our own day. To live with the Holy Spirit lighting our way, in confidence that God loves us, and forgives us.

**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Amen.**