

Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-26  
Title: Freedom  
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Joe Huizenga writes about graduating from high school and being free:

*After 12 years of assignments, detentions, suspensions, and getting up early I was free to go out and live my absolute best life. My parent's let me off the leash.*

And so, for the next year Joe worked, went to college, ate out, stayed out, and lived without restraint. He was free to follow every will and whim. No longer hemmed in or required to live into the expectations of others, he could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted. He writes:

*After 9 months of my new freedom, I'd dropped out of 2 colleges, I wasn't exercising or playing any sport, and I wasn't accountable to anyone. I had no schedule and no money. I was unchallenged, out of shape, disconnected, depressed. I'd come along way for my freedom. I was free and I was miserable.*

Dear friends, I am not sure that any other word in our culture carries more freight than “freedom.” We attach all sorts of meanings to the word.

Freedom is the absence of restraint. Freedom is a God-given inalienable right. Freedom is the ability to buy a gun without restriction. Freedom is two gay partners sharing life and love as a married couple. Freedom is a bakery refusing to bake a cake for their wedding. Freedom is not wearing a mask in a pandemic. Freedom is driving away on the last day of school with the windows down and the radio blaring, “Freefalling.” Freedom is what we’ll celebrate in two weeks with brats and fireworks and...

You get the idea. I’m not sure that any other word in our culture carries more freight than “freedom.” We attach all sorts of meanings to the word. So, what does Paul mean when he writes: “It is for freedom that Christ has set you free.” Or, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.”

What does Paul mean by freedom?

What does it mean to be set free by Christ?

Let’s get at it this way....

Paul writes to the Galatians – who were living under Roman rule and not free by any stretch of the imagination – that circumcision was a symbol of law-keeping as the way to be right with God. (That’s the first part of Galatians chapter 5....)

And, according to Paul, by accepting circumcision you were accepting the keeping of the whole law. If any human effort squares things with God, then every human effort is required to square things with God. If playing by one rule makes a difference then you have to play by all the rules. If trimming the tip

changes the relationship then just go ahead and chop off the whole thing. (See 5:12)

Seems a little drastic, but there's a wholesale quality here. For Paul the restoration of right relationship with God is not to be trifled or trivialized by our flawed or finest efforts. There's no half stepping; there's no middle ground. Either we're made right with God by what we do, or we're made right by the unilateral action of God.

It's law or grace.

It's you or Christ.

It's all or nothing.

It's tyranny or freedom.

John Stott, an evangelical Englishman, puts it this way:

*...Christian freedom is freedom of conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with the view to winning the favor of God. It is the freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ.*

And, dear friends, that is to say that you're free from trying to prove yourself to God. You're free from every effort at being good enough, or right enough, or Christian enough....

You're free from religion as a vehicle to earn God's favor.

You're free from debt – even the debt of gratitude.

You're free not as a right, or an essential human quality, or a subjective feeling, but as an objective, ontological fact in the face of God. You're not guilty before God; you're accepted by God in Christ. And there is nothing that you can do to add to that. You are flat out free. Thanks be to God.

Do you experience life that way?

Do you experience life in Christ as freedom?

Do you feel free?

Not so much? Our impulse, inclination, or nature is to add something. There has to be something that we do. There are required behaviors. There has to be evidence that we're holding up our end of the bargain. We can't really be free of all religious obligation, there has to be some measure of obedience. Right?

The 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation was a revolution of religious freedom. Luther, Calvin, and others removed the impediments to being right with God. The cry was, "grace alone by faith alone."

It wasn't grace plus something extra.

It wasn't grace plus piety.

It wasn't grace plus keeping the rules.

It was grace alone by faith alone.

It was freedom from works....

Again. That makes us nervous. Freedom comes with responsibilities. You have to believe something and behave somehow. You have to do something! Otherwise, a baby could get in....

Maybe there's another way to get at Paul's understanding of freedom.

We live a couple blocks from a series of train tracks. The Metra electric line runs on one track, Amtrak trains fly by on another track, and Canadian National freight trains lurch and lumber forward on even other tracks. In the quiet of the night, I can hear the chug, the whir, or the whistle of trains on their tracks.

What I've learned is that trains run as long as they stay on their respective track. A train that jumps the tracks is "free" of the rails, but no longer free to travel, no longer free to be what it was built to be.

For Joe freedom meant freedom from restraint. He could do whatever he wanted to do, but eventually he was a train wreck. It would be hard to argue that he was truly free.

Essential to freedom in Christ is that we're free from that which deforms and derails. And we're free, therefore, to be who we're created to be. David Brooks is helpful here:

*In our culture we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. That's freedom from. But there is another and higher kind of freedom. That is freedom to. This is the freedom as fullness of capacity, and it often involves restriction and restraint.*

*You have to chain yourself to the piano and practice for year after year if you want to have the freedom to really play. You have to chain yourself to a certain set of virtuous habits so you don't become a slave to your destructive desires - the desire for alcohol, the desire for approval, the desire to lie in bed all day....*

Paul doesn't replace the Law with unrestrained-go-hog-buck-wild-do-whatever-you-want-license. Paul proclaims that we're free from the Law but that in Christ we're "in step with the Spirit." We're free to be who we're created to be – marked by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

The beauty of the Law, as an expression of God's way and will in this world, is that it sets tracks so our trains can run. It helps keep us from our destructive desires....

And, therefore, it's right to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and not the destruction of the Law. Jesus is the embodiment of the Law. Jesus is what the way and will of God looks like. Jesus is the what the "fruit of the Spirit" looks like in the flesh.

In 1520 Martin Luther addressed a pamphlet to Pope Leo X. Entitled, “The Freedom of a Christian,” it includes this line:

*A Christian man is the most-free, lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.*

By that Luther means that because of God’s acting in Christ we’re absolutely free from the bondage of the law. We don’t have to do a thing. But, because of God’s activity in Christ we’re bound to serve God and serve neighbor, to love God and love neighbor.

We’re free from Law; we’re free for love.

We’re free from self; we’re free for others.

We’re free from religion; we’re free for the Kingdom.

We’re free from distortion; we’re free to be who we were created to be.

We’re free to ride the rails.

We’re free in the Spirit to bear fruit.

We’re free to love.

Eugene Peterson translates our text this way:

*It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?*

*My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit..... And what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.