

Sermon for 5-17-09

Galatians 5:1-15

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” How do we understand freedom? Some believe the most important freedoms are found in journalism, others in voting, others in owning guns. Freedom is the name of a company that sells plastic pipe for water solutions or an ergonomic chair that requires minimal adjustment, or a sport fishing boat. Freedom for us can mean going off to college, getting to ride your bike around the neighborhood by yourself, going out on a date without kids, waking up with no pain. Freedom is usually focused on ourselves, on our own happiness.

The very reason that Christ has set us free can be misunderstood and misused. The life of freedom can be uncomfortable, dangerous, and ambivalent. We get to choose how we respond to God’s grace. This may force us into vulnerability, taking risks, and not knowing exactly what to do. Misunderstanding freedom makes it hard to create and sustain a commitment to join together with other Christians. Misusing our freedom is what leads confusion about faith, disagreement with one another, knowledge of our inadequacies, and competing religious influences to result in brokenness. Freedom in Christ leads those same reasons to result in stronger deeper fellowship.

We have been called to freedom which overcomes conflict in the community, nurtures fruits of the spirit (patience, gentleness, self-control,) and bears one another’s burdens. As we live in freedom, I believe God calls us to listen and then act together. God wants us to meet together to be encouraged and to encourage one another about faith. We meet together to be challenged and to challenge one another to live lives of love and service for Jesus Christ.

The Galatians misunderstand and misuse their freedom in Christ. They choose to return to the slavery of being justified by what they do, the law. For Jews, relationship with God has been established through the law. They can see and know someone is following God if they are, for example, circumcised. We share with the Galatians the desire for the law, to be certain that what we do is right or wrong, worthy or unworthy. We try to follow rules that make right and wrong clear. What happens is that we inevitably fail. When we do we choose from two options. We give up trying to be right and do whatever we want. Or we ‘live for others’ in a resentful way. They don’t notice what I am doing. I am the only one who is faithful. Both of these are selfish. If we cling to law to combat this selfishness we have fallen away from grace, saying we don’t want to belong to the Messiah’s people.

Because now in Christ there is a new way to relationship with God that wasn’t available before. Faith in God’s grace is different. God wants all of us, good/bad, right/wrong, worthy/unworthy. Galatians 4:5 says, “Through the Spirit,

by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” We hope in Christ that the life we live is no longer our own but his. Christ in us makes our actions righteous and loving. We know that without him our actions are wrong and unworthy no matter how ‘good’ they are.

We can’t make our actions be righteous. Hope is not in physically doing things like good deeds. We cannot maintain hope by our actions, good behavior, sincerity. Hope is spiritual, a ‘way of being’. In Christ Jesus right or wrong action under the law is not important what counts is faith working through love. If we hope to grow flowers we can’t just keep trying to keep the grass short, the change must be deeper. We need to let our lives be reseeded. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, the life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

God’s gift of faith alters our life. We respond with a new awareness of the people around us (our family, the community of believers, the larger community.) Faith is characterized by a concern for others (with a different history.) By faith we will live in love. The spirit gives us a restlessness to live as Christ did. God uses us to be a sign of what will be in full when he comes. But we still wait for the certainty of the final day when God will declare publicly that all those in Christ are his people.

In our waiting and living there is pressure from others to rely on the law rather than the truth that freedom is found in Christ. Paul says the Galatians were prevented from obeying the truth. He challenges them. The persuasion did not come from the one who called you. (Jesus is not guiding your actions. Someone is confusing you. (Maybe they were saying that they are just completing Paul’s message by adding circumcision. Paul would have told you later.)

There will be those that unsettle you that put pressure on you to live up to their standards. Human standards, even our own, take our foundation for faith and Christianity off of the cross. The painful, humbling, sacrificial death of Jesus that frees us from our sins.

This was a struggle for the soul and life of a Christian community: human effort or faith working through love. We face this struggle. Are we allowing God’s spirit to direct our lives even if it is away from happiness and apparent certainty? Is it in Christ where our true identity lies, where our deepest motivation comes from, where the power that rules our life is really found?

In Christ freedom moves beyond self-indulgence. True freedom is the opportunity through love to serve one another. As we create new community together, freedom is for a particular purpose: to love. The way God welcomes us should be the way we welcome one another. Sin is not ignored, but forgiven. Deeds done in Christian freedom are not coerced by religious obligation. We are not miffed by ‘ungrateful’ response to our service.

Commentator Charles Cousar, gives freedom missional framework. “If I in love really become a servant to my neighbor, than I am delivered from the temptation of paternalism, of constantly being the wiser, richer partner who always knows what is best for my needy friend. I am at my neighbors disposal and in serving him discover afresh the freedom God has given us both.”¹

We use our freedom to move beyond security, comfort and protection (self-interest) as the main reasons to gather. We gather to exercise our freedom risking to love and to serve our neighbors (those in and outside the church.) When this is our focus what will our church look like? What will our priorities be?

We may all think that we have the right priorities for our church. Often we squabble among ourselves biting and nipping at each other over who is right. Biting and nipping at one another can easily destroy fellowship. Lately my son Aaron will hold out his hand to his sister Rachel. Sometimes she will bite it; sometimes she will kiss it. Is our community of faith characterized by love or do we bite and nip?

Love is a total approach to life. Love is not being so friendly or nice that we fail to confront false teaching or make decisions some may not like. Love involves relationship. It is particular, not general. This means love demonstrated in decisions is made in specific contexts. Sometimes there is a yes/no on same request in different context. Should you sell an expensive bottle of perfume and give it to the poor or use it all up at one time? Yes and yes. When there is a specific need, you sell it, but the woman was also commended for breaking the bottle of perfume on Jesus’ feet. There is freedom to discern the appropriate way to love in a particular relationship and context.

In love there is freedom for compassion, creativity, and beauty to be discovered and experienced. Without love there is coldness, criticism, and envy. In the struggles and pressure we face and will face as individuals and as a church, can we be consumed with love for one another or will we consume one another?

¹ Cousar, Charles. Galatians, (Interpretation Bible Commentary Series), 130