

Christ has set us free

Craig Atwood, Home Moravian Church June 29, 2025

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

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 enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Introduction

"For Freedom Christ has set us free." This is Paul's summary of the Good News of Jesus Christ, which he preached to the Christians in Galatia. Christ has set us free. Notice he did not write, "Christ *will* set us free one day," but "Christ has already set us free."

It is remarkable that this text shows up in the international Christian lectionary for this week since Americans will be celebrating our Independence Day on July 4. This week we will hear the word "freedom" a lot, especially

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from politicians. But it's not always clear what they mean when they invoke the word "freedom." All too often, it seems to me, people define "freedom" as the power to have whatever you want for your pleasure or to do whatever you want to others. Some people want to have the power to do harm to others or to enrich themselves at the expense of others. The dictators, tyrants, and autocrats of this world celebrate their freedom while denying freedom to others. Freedom for them means oppression for others, but that's not what Paul is talking about. Freedom is for us all.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with the oppression of the Roman Empire. In fact, he had already been in prison and had worn chains when he wrote this letter, but that didn't matter because he knew he was free in Christ no matter what the Empire did to his body. Freedom for Paul was a state of mind. His word inspired the line in an old spiritual called His Eye is On the Sparrow: "I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free." I am free because I belong to God and not to emperors, tyrants, dictators, influencers, or others who hope for my allegiance.

Love fulfills the whole law

Paul was not writing to the rich and powerful leaders of the Roman Empire. This letter was addressed to an illegal gathering of Christians who were living as pilgrims in a hostile world. They had voluntarily rejected their old way of living and the old gods so that they could live as dearly beloved children of creator. Paul's message to them was profoundly simple. For freedom Christ has set us, but the meaning of freedom is to show love to one another.

I sing because I'm free. I'm free because I love Christ and love those whom Christ loves. Love, for Paul, is not a sentimental thing; love is active. Love is the intense desire to seek the good of another person. Like Jesus in the gospels, Paul tells us that entire law is fulfilled in a single word – Love. The most important commandment in the Old Testament is simply: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Paul believed that the church was the one place in this brutal world where the values of love and empathy govern our lives instead of greed and exploitation.

But Paul learned that the church in Galatia was being torn apart by legalism and judgmentalism. People were polarized into factions, and argued over morality and doctrine. In his letter, Paul held a mirror up for the Galatians to see that the result of their legalism was that they are arguing and fighting with each other. He describes them like hungry dogs trying to destroy one another.

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It is not really theology or doctrine that divides congregations and denominations; churches fall apart when members lose the ability to love another even though they may disagree.

The conflict in Galatia was so bad they would no longer even eat together. Paul did not side with any faction; he told all the Galatians that their conflict was the result of selfishness and self-righteousness. Their anger and divisiveness shows that they do not truly believe Christ that Christ has set us free. They were not the first or the last church to be riven by jealousy and censorious attitudes. Throughout history, Christians have turned away from freedom in Christ and turn back toward legalism, judgmentalism, and oppression. The church has often succumbed to the temptation to replace grace with rigid laws, forgiveness with condemnation, selflessness with selfishness, inner transformation with hypocrisy.

Grand Inquisitor

Paul knew that freedom is hard. He urged the Galatians to stand fast and live like men and women who have been liberated from the power of sin by Christ, but it is always tempting to give up our freedom for security. Last year I reread Fyodor Dostoyevsky's book *The Brothers Karamazov*, which includes a parable about Jesus returning in medieval Spain. The Grand Inquisitor of the Catholic Church recognized him and had him arrested because he knew that Jesus was a threat to the social order. He told Jesus that the Church had had to "correct" his teaching because people do not really want freedom.

The Inquisitor says to Jesus, "I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born." The Inquisitor tells Jesus that he will order the crowds to tie him to a stake and pile up wood, and they will light the fire obediently because they have chosen to be slaves protected by the church rather than live as free people. At the end of his long speech, the Inquisitor waits for Jesus to protest, but Jesus "approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the door, opened it, and said to Him: 'Go, and come no more... come not at all, never, never!'" Freedom can be hard.

Desires of the Flesh

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One of the difficult things about freedom in Christ is that human misunderstand freedom. Many people think that freedom means doing whatever you want without taking responsibility for your choices or the harm you do. In our lesson, Paul warns us that freedom does **not** mean wantonly gratifying the desires of the flesh.

Early theologians assumed that when Paul was talking about flesh and spirit, he was contrasting the body and soul, like Greek philosophers. Plato and others argued that we must suppress bodily desires, so we can focus on intellectual and spiritual pursuits. We should practice self-denial, fasting, and abstinence. In the movie *African Queen*, Captain Allnut complains to a woman missionary that her self-denial isn't natural. She replied: "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we were put on this earth to overcome." Many Christians still hold to this idea that our bodies and natural desires are sinful.

But I don't think that Paul is using the words "flesh" and "spirit" in this way. Most of the things Paul condemns as flesh in this passage have nothing to do with our bodies but with our minds and emotions. Flesh is not the meat on our bones or our physical needs; it is the undisciplined craving for power, property, and status. It is envy and greed. It is self-gratification at the expense of others. It is licentiousness, which always sounds better with a Southern accent.

Paul did not teach that the body is the prison for the soul; the body is the living Temple of the Spirit of Christ within us. In urging the Galatians to walk in the Spirit of Christ instead of satisfying their fleshly desires, Paul is saying that our minds *and* bodies should be transformed filled with Christ's Spirit. Those who are in Christ live differently than other people, not because they mortify their flesh or hate their bodies. They live differently because their desires are different. They are free to be who Christ wants them to be without worrying about fulfilling the expectations of others. They know who they are and whose they are and by whom they are loved.

Walk by the Spirit

Paul tells the Galatians they need to turn away from the selfishness, legalism, and judgmentalism that is destroying their church. Instead, they should walk by the Spirit of Christ. For some reason most modern English translations of Galatians, including the one I read a few minutes ago, say that we should "live by the Spirit," instead of the literal translation of "walk by the Spirit." To be honest, I don't know why they do this, but I think there is a difference between

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living and walking. The word “live” can refer to a passive state of existence, but “walk” is an active verb. When we walk, we engage our bodies, minds, and senses. We breathe deeper. One of the highlights of our recent vacation to Yosemite was walking in a grove of mighty sequoia trees and just deeply breathing the air. It was holy.

In Paul’s day, walking was the main form of transportation. Almost everyone walked several miles a day, but today we travel in cars. We shut ourselves up into private worlds, with our air conditioning and curated music. We drive past our neighbors while drinking our coffee without even noticing them, much less speaking to them.

When I was recovering from open-heart surgery a few years ago, I started walking every day to build up my stamina. I started with just my block, but gradually extended it to a couple of miles. I would leave the house and stroll throughout the city of Bethlehem and wind up back at my front door. You might think this was pointless since the walk took me back where I started, but it was an active walk. I strained my muscles and felt the blood pumping and lungs working. As I walked, I greeted neighbors, petted dogs, picked up trash, enjoyed flowers, and avoided motorists. I also thought and prayed. When Paul tells us to walk by the Spirit; he meant an active walk that takes Spirit of Christ into the world.

Conclusion: Fruit of the Spirit

To make his point clear that freedom is not the same as licentiousness, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. Too often throughout history, people have claimed that fanaticism, blind devotion, and zealotry are signs of religious faithfulness, but Paul says something very different in Galatians. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are things that cannot be legislated or demanded of people. They must be learned, experienced, and embodied. They are gifts of God.

If we oppress, harass, and abuse others, we merely prove that we are still enslaved by sin. If we are obsessed with status, power, security, or authority, we are worshiping our idols rather than Christ. If we are overly anxious about our looks, our property, our wants, and our cravings, we prove we are enslaved. But if we have been redeemed by Christ and reclaimed by God as his dearly beloved children, then we are free to serve one another out of love.

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If the Spirit of Christ is present in our congregation, there will be joy rather than anger. If the Spirit of Christ is present, there will be gentleness and kindness rather than cruelty and fear. If the Spirit of Christ is present, will be generous with time and money rather than selfish. Those who walk by the Spirit of Christ will live in peace and seek to do good on their pilgrimage in the world.

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