

“Holding on to Our Freedom in Christ”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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As many of you know, we spent seven days of a two-week vacation in Memphis where Ian has just finished the first year of a PhD program at the University of Tennessee’s Health Science Center. We had a wonderful time with Ian and a significant friend of his. We saw the Memphis Zoo, which is one of the oldest and finest in the nation and we spent a day at the National Civil Rights Museum, which is housed in the Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. That was a heavy day, very much like visiting the Holocaust Museum.

But lest anyone think we spent too much time with Ian, I would hasten to add that we rented a small house that has a fenced-in yard so that we could give Ian space and take our German Shepherds with us. And the dogs may have had an even better time than we did, partly because they got to see Ian – he is Tusker’s favorite – and partly because Memphis, like Raleigh, has some amazing parks. Overton Park, where the Zoo is located and very near where we stayed, has wonderful trails and a small dog park, and Shelby Farms, which has 4,500 acres, has a massive area with trails and ponds where dogs can be off-leash.

Tusker and Rika had never been anywhere like this. So, when we released them, they went bounding over a hill like they had just been released after years of captivity and were set free into some kind of Canine Promised Land, which I suppose they were. It would have been nice to have captured them on film, perhaps even in slow motion, with their heads up and their hair flowing in the breeze. Before too long, we called them to make sure they would come back and eventually had to bring them all the way back because Rika was headed to a pond where she most surely would have jumped in. She loves water so much that we have bought a baby pool for her. But eventually we had to leash them back up which was a difficult process. Once you have run free, with your hair dancing in the wind, who wants to be bound up again?

This is the Apostle Paul's perspective as he writes to the churches of Galatia. After a lifetime of having been bound by the dictates of the law, trying in vain to please a Holy God, the people have been set free in Christ, redeemed by grace and grace alone. But for some reason, many of them have gone back to the old ways of trying to follow the letter of the law, in effect requiring new believers to become Jewish before they become Christian. "Why would you want to do that?" Paul wonders. Once you have run free, why would you want to be bound up again? "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Why would anyone who has known true freedom ever want to go back to slavery?

Well, there are a number of reasons. Consider the nation of Israel, delivered from bondage in Egypt, making their way to the Promised Land – it doesn't take long for the people to start longing for the comforts of home back in Egypt. To be sure, they were not free, but they had a place to sleep and food to eat. In the wilderness, they never know where their next meal is coming from or where they will sleep. Freedom brings many unknowns, many uncertainties, many risks, whereas back in Egypt, more things were sure. They are tempted to go back to a safe and secure place, no matter how inadequate, rather than venture further into unknown territory which requires courage and trust in God. They don't go back, but they are tempted.

In like manner, the inmates who get released in *The Shawshank Redemption* struggle to make it on the outside. One even feels so overwhelmed by his new freedom that he takes his own life. It is a tragic reminder that reentry into society after a long period of incarceration is no easy venture. Freedom can be frightening.

In this nation, as we approach Independence Day and think about the freedoms we have, it's been too long for any of us to remember a previous way of living. We are not tempted to go back in this sense, but we are tempted to inadvertently return to a yoke of slavery by not appreciating the nature of our freedom and its cost, not just in terms of military sacrifices, but living with the uncertainties freedom brings.

True freedom means that people think, worship and live in ways very different than we do. Sometimes we struggle with these realities

and thus act in ways that restrict the freedom of others. In the realm of religious liberty especially, an area of national life influenced significantly by our Baptist forbearers, there are many threats in this time that most people don't recognize as threats, subtle moves to establish religion in violation of the First Amendment.

There is a scene in the film *Star Wars: Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* in which Senator Palpatine quietly rises to the role of Chancellor and the Republic becomes an Empire with a dictator. The senators do not realize what is happening; they don't know who Palpatine really is, a dark lord; and thus, Senator Padme Amidala observes, "So this is how liberty dies... with thunderous applause."

We may not think this can happen to us, that our freedoms are beyond reach, but they are not. No freedoms are. And if they are to be lost, it will most likely be through a slow and deceptive process wherein we don't realize what is happening until it is too late.

So, there are reasons people are tempted to return to bondage even after experiencing freedom and many examples of when people have done so. But Paul's primary concern is with our freedom in Christ, our spiritual freedom. He has a different message to the church in Corinth. They are feeling a bit too free. So, Paul tries to rein them in. But the Galatians are too legalistic, like some churches today. So, he tries to loosen them up, or to be more precise, to remind them that it is by grace that they are saved.

They are like a small Jewish community in Uganda started unintentionally by Christian missionaries. I got to know about these folks when their leader came to visit an interfaith group I was a part of in Winston-Salem. He was talking about an interfaith agricultural cooperative that grew and sold organic, fair-trade coffee, and he was from the Jewish part of that cooperative which had an unusual history.

Christian missionaries had come to tell them about Jesus and a part of how they did this was by having them read the Bible. They read it and took it seriously, including the teachings in the Torah about how to live. In fact, they took these teachings so seriously that the missionaries said, "You don't have to follow all of those laws." "But they are in the

Bible,” the people said, to which the missionaries replied, “Yes, but we are saved by grace. How we live matters, but we don’t have to follow all of those laws. You might as well be Jewish if you do that.”

Well, rather than saying, “Oh, thank goodness,” the people said, “Maybe we are Jewish.” They explored the matter further, decided they were, and managed to find a rabbi to lead them. It is the only Jewish community I know of that was started by Christian missionaries...

This is how the churches of Galatia are functioning and Paul pleads with them to live by grace. But he not only pleads with them, saying, “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery;” he offers them help for how to live by grace in the other verses we have read today.

It may seem like Paul is contradicting himself when he says, “You were called to freedom... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” After telling the people not to live as slaves to the law, not to be obsessed with do’s and don’ts, he offers them a list of dos and don’ts. But what he is really doing is offering them some structure for how to live in the context of grace. Freedom and responsibility are heads and tails of the same coin and having some idea about how to live with newfound freedom can lessen the anxiety of venturing into uncharted territory – this new life in Christ.

The list of don’ts is an obvious catalogue of destructive behavior that is not meant to be exhaustive. The works of the flesh are obvious, Paul says, and after he lists some of them – impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, jealousy, anger, envy, drunkenness – he adds the phrase, “And things like these.” So, we get the point. We are saved by grace and free to live in Christ, but there are things that cause obvious harm to others and to ourselves that we ought not do. This doesn’t mean that we don’t ever do them. It just means that we strive not to in the context of grace.

I read an interesting article this week in *The Christian Century* written by Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary. A student came to him just before graduation upset because he had been told by the registrar and the dean that he had not completed his requirements and thus could not graduate. He offered excuses, none of which had any validity, said his parents had bought plane tickets to watch him graduate, and finally asserted that this hurt his feelings.

Barnes was not completely unsympathetic, but the student had not finished his work, and in regard to this matter of feeling hurt, he had a further thought. Part of being a pastor, indeed part of being a church member, part of being human, is dealing with feelings of being hurt, because human beings hurt each other whether we intend to or not. How would he deal with such feelings as a pastor, Barnes asked? At this point, the student walked out of his office.

Seminary is a place, Barnes continued, where among other things, we try to help students learn about Christian community, and this means learning how to handle the joy and the wounds that inevitably come. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes in his book *Life Together*, he says, Christian community is not a human ideal but a divine reality. God places flawed people together in flawed communities in order to discover the redemption Christ alone can bring.

In the end, the registrar, dean and president decided to let the student walk with his class with an asterisk next to his name noting that his graduation was pending completion of requirements. So, they balanced grace with truth. But the larger reflection about Christian community is insightful. Perfection is not possible. The church is not paradise. We are all flawed and fall short of the mark, and thus depend upon grace. This doesn't mean we make no effort to avoid obviously destructive behavior. We are free in Christ, but with freedom comes responsibility. Yet this is not the same thing as slavery to the law. We seek to avoid destructive behavior, but we will never do so perfectly.

The list of dos Paul provides is an equally obvious catalogue of noble and uplifting behavior that we don't have to perfect in order to receive God's love, but aspire to naturally in response to grace – things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul says such behavior is the fruit of the Spirit. It's not just a catchy phrase, but a very specific claim – that when we are rooted in the Spirit, this is the fruit we bear. There is no law against such things, he says, there is nothing controversial about seeking these qualities. The best way we embrace our gift of freedom is by practicing love, peace, patience, kindness, etc.

Now, both lists are helpful, as long as we keep them in perspective. Both offer some structure for how to embrace our freedom in Christ. There are habits we need to avoid and habits we need to pursue, but in my experience the latter are more helpful. I have used this analogy in different ways before, but in Christian life we are a lot like two-year-olds. It is much more difficult to stop a two-year-old from playing in the toilet than it is to attract a two-year-old to the block table. Engaging a positive is more energizing than disengaging a negative, though both are important. As we think of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ setting us free, what it frees us to do is what really matters.

And the truth is, focusing on this aspect of Christian responsibility presents a more effective witness for the church. Very few people are interested in joining a faith defined by what it is against. There are certainly things to be against – like racism, sexism, addiction, human trafficking – and leaving behind these forms of enslavement is an ongoing battle. I think of the character Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, a story set in post-Civil War Ohio. She is an escaped slave who has risked her life to get away from a living death. But every day she lives in freedom, she has to beat back the memories of the past, memories of enslavement, family separation, brutality, indignity.

But there are also many things to be for and our engagement of them is more attractive than our opposition to the real or perceived sins of the past. Whatever we are against, we are for helping people in need, we are for embracing all people in love, we are for great music and art, we are for seeking God every way we can to enrich the lives of individuals and communities. We are for love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. That’s how we structure our lives, that’s what enables us to hold on to our freedom and that’s a faith that attracts other people to it.

The only reason we reined in our dogs at all at Shelby Farms was for their protection - so that they did not get lost, hit by a car or drown. The only limits God places on our freedom in Christ are those which protect us. They are not random rules to stifle joy. They are guardrails designed to help us enjoy our freedom in Christ. May we enjoy it responsibly and may we invite others to join in the celebration!