

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Free to Love

Galatians 5:13-15

The smoke from last night's fireworks may have dispersed, but the cloud of the coronavirus pandemic still lingers over the land of the free. In several states, the number of new cases has surged again. Authorities in those areas have rolled back some of their reopening plans. Pressure has increased on hospital capacity. And debates about face masks continue.

At his press conference earlier this week, Ohio Governor Mike Dewine told the residents of his state, "If we want to be able to go out and live our lives, this mask is a symbol of freedom." Surgeon General Jerome Adams wrote in a tweet, "Some feel face coverings infringe on their freedom of choice—but if more wear them, we'll have MORE freedom to go out." Little did we know that when Independence Day 2020 rolled around, our reflections on freedom, and our decisions about how to exercise it, would be revolving around face coverings. None of us could have anticipated that face masks would be promoted as a symbol of freedom.

This morning I stand before you and look out at a multitude of face masks, of varying shapes, sizes, and designs. In keeping with the guidelines and policies we set for the church's reopening, when speaking from the pulpit, I'm "free" to remove my mask. And if you look over my right shoulder you'll see another symbol of freedom, our nation's flag. So just about every way you turn this morning, there's an emblem of liberty in your field of vision.

But all these signs of freedom fall under the dominance and influence of our church's main symbol of liberty, the cross. That's why it sits atop the tower on the educational wing of our facility. The stars and stripes may hold a special place in our hearts, and generate a variety of reactions, but the symbol that gets most elevated in the community of Christ's people is the one on which our Lord gave himself for us, demonstrating his love and securing our liberty.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," declares Paul. "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). That's how Paul opens the chapter in which we find today's text. He reminds the Galatians that in their life together, they operate within an environment of liberty. That's because in and through the death of Jesus, God has acted to rescue them from the enslaving and oppressive power of sin and death. They've been released for life in the reign of God, the new creation that God has brought into existence through Christ.

The problem is, some of the Galatians aren't thinking and acting like they're free. They've aligned themselves with some rival missionaries who have come into the congregation with a message that runs against the grain of the good news that Paul has been preaching. These rival missionaries agree that faith in Christ is good, as far as it goes. But from there they want to tack on additional expectations, rules, and regulations rooted in Jewish law

and custom, especially Sabbath restrictions, dietary laws, and the calendar of feasts and festivals. To some, this may come across as an attractive way of filling out or completing the saving work of God in Christ. But to Paul, it comes across as a contradiction of what God has already accomplished in Christ. And anyone who signs on to this version of the gospel, and takes on the lifestyle that goes with it, is acting as if the death and resurrection of Jesus are inadequate for our salvation. In effect, they're exiting the new creation and re-entering the old reality of a world that's passing away.

So at the beginning of today's text, Paul summons these errant Galatians back, once again, to freedom. "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free" (v. 13a). Their freedom isn't something they've accomplished. It's something God has accomplished. And God has accomplished it because this is his will for them. He doesn't intend for them to live in bondage to the power of sin and death. He has claimed them as his own and set them apart so that they may reflect his character in their life together. Notice that freedom for the Galatians doesn't mean independence from God and from one another. It means having a prior claim, God's claim, upon their lives, a claim that automatically binds their lives to one another in the church.

It's one thing to announce freedom. It's another thing to define what that freedom should look like in the nitty gritty of congregational life. So Paul goes on, "But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (v. 13b). Sometimes Paul uses the term "flesh" to refer to the physical body or the stuff of which it's made, especially in the sense of limitation or mortality. At other times, he uses "flesh" to refer to a power that's resident in human life, opposing and working against the will and purposes of God. That may be what Paul has in mind in our text, where he urges the Galatians not to let the flesh take their freedom and turn it into an opportunity for them to indulge themselves.

Instead, says Paul, the best way for them to combat the power of the flesh is to "serve one another in love." The translation "serve" captures the essence of Paul's message, but it doesn't fully convey the power of his imagery. The verb rendered as "serve" actually has to do with slavery. "Through love become slaves to one another" (v. 13c). This is striking language, especially in a day and time when we're still coming to grips with the horrible legacy of slavery in our own society and culture. The ongoing racial tensions and divisions in our nation have their roots in the enslavement of African Americans, and all the injustices that have flowed from it. So I'm alert to how the first-century language of slavery can strike us in our twentieth-century American context.

But even so, we can still be open to the ethical exhortation that Paul is employing to shape the Galatians' behavior toward one another. He's urging them to use their freedom in Christ to enslave themselves to one another through acts of self-giving love. In that respect, Paul is redefining slavery. Instead of being hierarchical, it's horizontal. In other words, the best way for the Galatians to combat the flesh and keep it from gaining a foothold in their lives and in the church is to mutually serve each other. Otherwise, the flesh will lead them into rivalry, competition, and division. Without mutual service, they'll end up in mutual destruction.

Several years ago, Google released a database of over 5 million books published between 1500 and 2008. This enables you to type a search word into the database and discover how often it has been used over the centuries. Columnist David Brooks used this data to offer what he calls the "story of the last half-century." According to Brooks, one key piece of this story is the rise of individualism. He says that in the past 50 years, "individualistic words and phrases increasingly overshadowed communal words and phrases." For example,

words like "self," "personalized," "I come first," and "I can do it myself" have been used more frequently. By contrast, words like "community," "share," "band together," and "common good" have been used less frequently. After coupling this trend with a decline in moral virtue, Brooks concludes, "So the story I'd like to tell is this: Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked."¹

In today's text, Paul is trying to develop the Galatians' social and moral fabric. For that to happen, they first need to stay put in the freedom they have through Christ. And secondly, they need to use that freedom to love one another. The kind of freedom Paul is describing is different from the ways that we often conceive of freedom. In our social and political context, freedom has to do mainly with personal autonomy and individual rights, woven into our nation's history and form of government. These are good and important things, worthy of remembrance and celebration. But as with everything else, we who profess faith in Jesus Christ view these things through the lens of the cross. We see that our deepest and most enduring liberty came at the cost of the death of God's Son.

Liberty from sin, death, and the Devil doesn't wall us off from one another, so we can each live in our own little autonomous kingdom, free from any restraints. On the contrary, Jesus' self-giving on the cross releases us to live freely under his Lordship. And freely means responsibly, because Jesus' death for your sins, received in faith, creates ties rather severing them. The cross binds you to Christ and to the community of Christ's people. And in being bound by the love of God is true freedom, the freedom of being loved and of loving. No wonder Paul says that the full meaning of the Jewish Law has been brought to completion by Jesus. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 14).

In a sermon titled "Freedom," preacher John Stott reflects on the nature and purpose of human beings through the experience of a fish. Stott says:

Take a fish as an obvious example. God created fish to live and thrive in water, whether salt or fresh. Gills are adapted to absorb oxygen from water, so water is the element in which a fish finds its identity, its "fishness," its freedom. It finds itself in the element for which it was created: water. It's limited to water, but in that limitation is liberty.

Suppose you had a little tropical fish in one of those old-fashioned, spherical goldfish bowls. Suppose the little fish swam round and round his blessed bowl until its frustration became unbearable. The fish decided to make a bid for freedom and leap out of the bowl. If it landed in a pond in your backyard, it would increase its freedom because there would be more water to swim in. But if it landed on the concrete or on the carpet, then its bid for freedom would spell death.

If fish were meant for water, what are human beings made for? It would be interesting if we had time to sit down alongside one another and share our answers to that question. If fish were made for water, what are human beings made for? What is the element in which human beings find themselves, as water is the element in which a fish finds itself?

I don't hesitate to say that according to Scripture the answer is love. Human beings are made for love because God is love. When he created us in his own image, he gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So human beings find their destiny in loving God and in loving their neighbors.²

Jesus gave himself for our sins in order to bring us to the purpose, the destiny, for which God created us. Jesus employed his freedom, not for the sake of self-preservation but for the sake of self-giving love. We who profess faith in him and live under his Lordship are

called to lives that correspond to and mirror the love of Jesus. And the primary place we do that is in the life of the church. This community of believers is where we exercise our freedom through love for one another, as the Spirit enables us to depend on one another, be responsible for one another, and give ourselves to one another.

Victor Frankl once wrote, "Freedom is only part of the story and half the truth.... That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast."³ What Frankl was pointing to for our nation is something that's supposed to be embodied in the way that we share life together in the church. The liberty we have in Christ is not just freedom *from* but also freedom *for*. Freedom for mutual service and self-giving faithfulness to one another.

¹ David Brooks, "What Our Words Tell Us." *The New York Times* (May 20, 2013).

² John Stott, "Freedom." *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 102.

³ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Touchstone, 1984) n.p.