

July 6, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Called to Freedom*

Galatians 5:13 – 15

I am sure all of you have seen the greatest symbol of America either in person or in pictures – the statue of Liberty that stands in New York harbor. And it is significant that the most recognizable symbol of this country is the one that stands for the idea of freedom. Part of the wording etched on the statue reads: *"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."* It was this same yearning to breathe free that led to our independence from an out-of-touch, tyrannical rule of a mostly mad king and arrogant parliament in 1776 – and it is the thing that still characterizes America today. **At its core, this idea of freedom is the freedom from something and the freedom to something.** It is the idea of our inherent, God-given right to be free from oppressive, arbitrary, tyrannical rule – and the right to be free to do what we please within certain boundaries. We would die, and many have died, to preserve our freedom – and we have defended and still defend today the right of people everywhere to enjoy this freedom. But what exactly is real freedom? We have been called to freedom – it was for freedom's sake that Christ set us free – but what does that really mean? What are the practical implications of this freedom?

Paul began this chapter with an exhortation to stand in the freedom won for us by Christ: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.* Don't slide back into slavery – keep standing free. Don't be enslaved again to the things for which Christ died to win your freedom. *Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.* Galatians 5:2 **That is, if you choose to work for your salvation – then Christ cannot do anything for you.** If you replace grace with works – what you get is slavery and not freedom. If you try to earn it – you won't get it. **The benefit of Christ is freedom.** Christ died that we might be free and the doctrine of human achievement renders His death worthless to you – His sacrifice would not profit you at all – His death would be meaningless if we continued to count on something we had done to save us.

*And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.* Galatians 5:3 Furthermore, Paul says, if you are trusting in Christ ninety-nine percent for salvation and just one percent in circumcision, – you have to understand that that one percent stands for the whole Law, and if you don't keep it all – you've kept none of it. That goes right to the heart of our religious souls that like to look at the part we do keep – perhaps we are not adulterers, or murderers, or thieves – and we think we're doing pretty good – we just lie a little – or we don't really love God supremely or our neighbor as ourself. We fail to see that trying to do something to earn grace is slavery – not freedom.

In that case, Paul says, *You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.* Galatians 5:4 That is, your emphasis on doing for God has cut off the grace that flows to you when you are rightly related to Christ. This does not mean that a genuine, born-again believer can lose his salvation – but rather that when he depends on his doing rather than on the grace of God, he effectively cuts off the flow of the power of God that enables him to keep the law of God at all. **The issue is not eternal salvation, but effective relationship with Christ.** Through Christ we have been liberated from the demands of the law that we could not keep as slaves of sin, and **freed by grace to keep all the commands of God.**

Grace also rescues us from the prison of the Debtor's Ethic that tries to pay God back for something He has freely given; it transforms sinners into saints; and calls us to live in the freedom of the sons of God. So Paul says: *For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* Galatians 5:13

**When someone comes to Christ – he comes to the land of liberty.** Whether he knows it or not – everything before Christ is wrapped in the chains of tyranny – the tyranny of sin – the depravity of mankind as a whole; the tyranny of our environment – how we were raised; the tyranny of genetics – the heritage of our birth. So many things work to keep us slaves – and it is not until Christ breaks those chains that we truly understand that we have been liberated. For some it is freedom from guilt – for some a freedom from bad habits – for some a freedom from a sense of impending doom, or freedom from hopelessness. In any case it is **a sense of liberation from something** that has held them captive till now.

**It is also a freedom to something.** It is a freedom to live as you please, fulfilling your deepest desires and longings without guilt or fear. Now that may sound like radical, even sinful hedonism to you – but we need to see freedom in its proper context. When God created man He said something about man that He didn't say about any of the rest of His creation. When He created the sun and the moon and the stars – He said it was good. When He created the plants and the animals – He said it was good. When God separated the land and the seas – He said it was good. But when His creation culminated in man – He said **'Very good!'**

The creation of man was very good because there was no sin to corrupt him. **All of Adam's desires and thoughts were good** – the Bible records that he and his wife were naked and not ashamed – they lived in perfect freedom. None of their deepest desires and longings caused them pain or fear or guilt. They were truly free in the fullest sense of the word – but as Paul warned the Galatians – they allowed their freedom to turn into tyranny – the tyranny of sin. No one can be truly free when he is wrapped in the chains of sin. Sin perverts the idea of freedom into one that serves only itself. True freedom, real freedom is only found when we are rightly related to Christ. **The pleasures of sin last only for a season (Hebrews 11:25)– but the pleasures of God last for eternity.** The psalmists says: *You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.* Psalm 16:11

**God created us to enjoy Him.** He created us for pleasure. He gave us desires and longings so that they might be fulfilled in Him. Life in Christ is about pleasure and fulfillment. Unfortunately, there is a kind of thought in many Christian circles that any pleasure is bad. There is a thought that says if you come to Christ you won't have any more fun. There is view that sees an ogre on the throne waiting to stomp you down when you step out of line – instead of a God that takes pleasure in us and intends that we take pleasure in Him. And when we live in that kind of relationship with God – it brings a freedom to live as you please. That is why Augustine could boldly say, **"Love God and do as you please."** **Because if you are loving God, then what pleases you is what pleases God.**

But because of sin, there is a danger that we will use our freedom, as Paul says, as *an opportunity for the flesh*. What does that mean exactly? First of all it means that we carry something around with us since the Fall called the flesh. And the flesh is our fallen human nature, the 'old man' of Colossians 3:9. – that part of us that is prone to sin – that part of us that is bent toward things like *sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these...* (Galatians 5:19-21) And Paul says that even though we have been called to freedom – there is a danger that we would mis-use this freedom to indulge our lusts.

For example, and I could use some of the grosser sins as examples, but too many of you might not see yourselves in that example – so I'll use the sin of division. As Christians we are free to worship God in whatever way we find pleasurable. There are no Biblical mandates on the form our worship must take. We are free to raise our hands or not. We are free to use instruments in songs to our God – or not. We are free to dance and we are free to sway – or not. We are free in so many ways. The Bible purposely, I believe does not mandate one way to express our love and worship of an infinite God. But some take this freedom and wrap chains around others because they think that their worship of God is the right way – and they cause division in the body of Christ. And division is listed right along with sexual immorality and drunkenness as deeds of the flesh. There is one prominent church leader – you would immediately recognize the name if I said it – that will throw you out of his church if you raise your hands in worship. That is not freedom – that is slavery – slavery to the law..

And Paul says **'Don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh'**. The word he uses here translated opportunity is a military term referring to a 'base of operations'. Don't make your flesh your base of operations. That is don't make your sinful desires the point of reference for your decisions and actions – don't indulge the lusts of the flesh – *but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."* Gal. 5:14 When we operate from the base of the flesh – we fall once again under the yoke of slavery – we are no longer free. But when we operate in the freedom to which Christ called us – we are operating from the base of love – and that is freedom. **Love is motivated by the joy of sharing our fullness – the flesh is motivated by the desire to fill our emptiness.** There is a deep and unquenchable emptiness in our sinful flesh that we attempt to fill with all kinds of sinful pleasures – and it's never enough. But Paul says **'Don't surrender the freedom you have in the all-satisfying Christ to the enslaving, unsatisfying desires for self-gratification.'**

We might think it strange and unusual that Paul quotes the law when talking about freedom – but the law of God is just a reflection of who God is – **God is love**, the Bible says – and **people who are satisfied in God will overflow with love toward God and toward one another. Love spills out when our highest pleasure and greatest joy is Jesus.** People who devote huge chunks of their money and time to getting and maintaining things, simply testify by their lives that God is not their highest pleasure, and **consequently they do not serve one another, but themselves.** But those who have been consumed by the love of God, look for opportunities to spill out in the lives of others and their greatest satisfaction and joy is to see others glad in God. When God is our delight then we are truly free and we will serve one another with gladness and joy through love.

But too often we see in the church a different story. Paul says, *'But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.'* Galatians 5:15 The result of operating out of the base of the flesh is that we turn into cannibals. The word picture here is strong and we see it in too many churches that profess the love of Christ today. Because our flesh is motivated by the desire to fill our own emptiness – we get critical of one another – we gossip about one another – we get mad and leave the church because someone offended us. **Because we are not satisfied in God – we can never be satisfied with each other** – and because our highest pleasure and greatest joy is ourselves and not Jesus – we take a bite out of our brother.

One of the best cures for this problem is to simply obey the commandment of our Lord to 'go and make disciples'. Someone who is hard at work making disciples doesn't have a lot of time to worry about offenses – he doesn't have the time to be critical of others – **he's too busy helping others get glad in God to get mad at his brother.** One day a lady criticized D. L. Moody for his methods of evangelism in attempting to win people to the Lord. Moody's reply was **"I agree with you. I don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?"** The lady haughtily replied, **"I don't do it."** Moody replied, **"Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it."**

The job of the church is not to impact the church, but to impact the world. Our gatherings are like a huddle in a football game. 65,000 people don't pay \$50.00 a ticket to watch the Seahawks huddle. What if you went to a Seahawk game and for 2 ½ hours you watched 11 men stand in a circle and talk? That's not what you pay for!! **65,000 people pay \$50 a ticket to see what difference the huddle makes!** What they want to know is, **having called the play in secret, does it work in public?** The challenge for the church is not what we do when we call our Sunday morning huddle, but what we do when we break our huddle and head to our Sunday morning assignment.

We've been called to freedom – the freedom of being fully satisfied in God – the freedom to spill over into the lives of others through serving them – let us use that freedom as the base of operations to make others glad in Him too. This is why Jesus came and died on the cross – **and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.** 2 Corinthians 5:15

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,*

*Thank You for freely giving Your Son to purchase our freedom. Thank You Jesus for freely paying our debt and rescuing us from the slavery of sin and death. Thank You Holy Spirit for bringing us out of darkness and into the glorious light of freedom. Your name is excellent, Your glory high, Your compassion are unfailing and Your mercies are new every morning. Thank You for all the promises of the gospel – pardon for rebels, healing for the sick, hope for the downtrodden, salvation for the lost and freedom for the captives. Grant that we would ever live in freedom and not turn again to the slavery of sin. Keep us in the freedom of experiencing the joy of Your salvation continually; and grant that we would be satisfied wholly in You. To know You is life eternal; in Your presence is fullness of joy; and at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. May our gladness in You spill over into making others glad in You as well, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.*

**May the Lord bless you and keep you,  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on You,  
and give you peace.**