



THE PURPOSE OF FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 982
Galatians 5:13-15
Fifteenth Message
John Hanneman
May 7th, 1995

Our dog Molly is a large, friendly golden retriever. We like to take her to the park, unleash her and watch as she gallops gleefully across the grass at full speed. But there is always a risk when we grant her freedom to run. Will she get into trouble? Will she attack the children playing in the sand pile? Will her friendliness anger the owner of another dog? Can we let go of the controls and trust that everything will be all right?

The theme of the book of Galatians is that in Christ, Christians are set free from the law, free from rules that define behavior and from seeking to be approved through their own efforts. As the apostle Paul put it, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (5:1). Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law. The leash of the law has been removed, as it were, and now we can run the race with joy.

But there is a risk inherent in this freedom. If we let go of the controls that tell us what to do and how to do it, isn't there a danger that things will get out of control? If freedom is practiced in the church and people stop trying to exert control over the lives of others (which they maintain they do in their best interests, of course) won't everything fall apart? Won't people take advantage of their new-found freedom? Albert Camus said, "Liberty is dangerous, as hard to get along with as it is exciting" (quoted by E. Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 149). Eugene Patterson had this to say about freedom, "We cannot domesticate freedom. There are unpredictable energies in it that are of its very essence. If we are going to have the deep excitements of freedom, we also will have to live with the risks of freedom" (*Traveling Light*, 150).

In our study in Galatians 5 today, we begin at last to address this critical question relating to freedom in Christ: If we practice Christian freedom, how are we going to control sin? To put it another way, if we proclaim Christian freedom, will anarchy result? When we talk about freedom from the law, will Christians interpret this to mean they have freedom to sin? And how can we become holy if we don't live under law? Many of you began to ponder this as soon as we started talking about freedom. This is the apparent dilemma that keeps some churches under law and keeps Christians from the glorious freedom that God has granted them in Christ.

In order to answer these questions it is important to first understand why God has set Christians free from the law. If God has called us to freedom, then he must have some divine purpose in mind. Once we understand this purpose we will see what we are free from, and also what we are free to do. (In subsequent studies we will talk more about how to live lives that are holy, but for this morning the spotlight is on the purpose behind freedom.)

Our text is Galatians 5:13-15:

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. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another. (Gal 5:13-15, NASB)

These verses address the following three things: the misuse of freedom; the proper use of freedom; and a warning concerning freedom.

First, the misuse of freedom. As we have already seen, the freedom that we have been talking about in these studies is the freedom from living under law, from performing in order to gain approval, which is often characteristic of our relationships. Paul begins by making an assumption: "you were called to freedom," he says. He has used this word "call" thus far in this book to describe God's actions in calling both himself and the Galatians into a relationship with him. But we are not only called into relationship with God, we are called to live free lives. Freedom therefore does not originate with us; it is the divine call of God.

Then Paul states what this freedom does not permit: it is not to be used as "an opportunity for the flesh." The flesh, according to John Stott, is, "our fallen human nature, which we inherited from our parents and they inherited from theirs, and which is twisted with self-centeredness and therefore prone to sin" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 140). The flesh is the hangover that all of us inherited from Adam. The word "opportunity" was used in those days in a military context to describe a place from which an offensive could be launched, a base of operations, i.e. a vantage-ground. Paul is saying that our freedom in Christ is not to be used as a pretext for self-indulgence, a launching pad for sin. The misuse of freedom is license.

Notice that verse 13 here is patterned after verse 1 of chapter 5. Both verses remind us of our freedom in Christ, and both give an exhortation. Verse 1 reminds us of our freedom and exhorts us to not fall into legalism; verse 13 reminds us of our freedom and exhorts us to not fall into license. These are the two dangers which we face with regard to our freedom, the two fronts on which we battle to experience our freedom in Christ. The free life in Christ can be compared to driving a car on a road that has a ditch on either side. One ditch is license, the other is legalism. The car is out of alignment, and thus is prone to drift to one side or the other. Satan's job, of course, is to push us into one of these extremes. Then, when we realize what we have done, we overcompensate and end up driving into the other ditch. We fight license by becoming legalistic and living by rules. Then we tire of living by rules and failing much of the time, and so we go the other extreme of giving way to sin.

So Paul's concern in verse 13 has to do with license. We have been called to freedom, but we must not let that freedom become a launching pad to indulge our flesh. This would be a gross misunderstanding of why we have been set free. We can illustrate this principle from the vantage point of parenting. The purpose and goal of parenting is to raise children and set them free to experience adulthood, not to hold onto them and control them. If we do not let them go, they won't experience freedom, and we will never enjoy an adult relationship with them. But it is hard to let children go. The world is a dangerous place. We fear they might fall and hurt themselves. Further, we are tempted to withhold freedom lest they run amuck and destroy their lives.

In the same way, God does not give us freedom so that we can engage in sin. As Christians, perhaps we are free to go to movies, but we should not use that freedom as an opportunity to engage in fantasy. In Christ we are free from the manipulation of our parents, but we should not use that freedom as an opportunity to ignore them or be angry towards them. In Christ we can enjoy a nice home or a restful vacation, but we should not use that freedom to store up treasures on earth. In Christ we are free to pursue academic excellence and work hard, but we should not use that freedom to prove ourselves superior to others.

God sets us free, but freedom is not granted that we might indulge the flesh and destroy ourselves.

What is the proper use of freedom then? And why has God called us to freedom? Paul's answer is found in these words from verse 13, "But through love serve one another." In verse 6 he said, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." Love is the ultimate goal of the Christian life. The first commandment is this: Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. This commandment sums up the entire law. This is the same

commandment that Jesus gave to the disciples in the Upper Room: "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The reason we have been set free is to love. "Christian liberty is service not selfishness," says John Stott (*Galatians*, 142). Lord Acton said, "Freedom is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought."

Notice that Paul makes an important assumption in the words "one another." He assumes that we will live in community with others. Freedom cannot be experienced in isolation. It is only in community with others that the Christian attains to freedom. The community and family in which we find ourselves should not be viewed as an opportunity for the flesh, but rather an opportunity to express our freedom in love. The community becomes the soil in which the roots of our free life take root and grow.

And God wants us to grow so that we love out of freedom and not serve out of duty. The law will not help us accomplish this ultimate goal. Our efforts to do so may look good, but they will not spring from a love that is based on freedom. Legalism inhibits love. When we are controlled by law, by performance, and by our preoccupation with seeking approval, we will not be free to love. We will be loving so that we might receive love and approval in return. But no amount of law keeping will transform a selfish heart to a loving heart or a bound-up spirit to a free spirit. Freedom is possible only in Christ, through his Spirit. And this is why God has set us free—that in community and in relationships we might express and experience a love that is free from all taint of legalism.

Some have to learn this lesson the hard way. Last fall, my wife and I visited New York City to celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary. One evening while we were returning to our hotel we passed a woman who was lying on the sidewalk. The only thing covering her body was a garbage bag. We had already seen many homeless people lying in the streets and, as terrible as the sight of this woman was, we kept walking. A few minutes later, my wife said to me, "God told me to do something." I winced. "What is it?" I asked. She said she wanted to buy a sweatshirt for the woman. I replied that it was late at night and I didn't feel safe on the streets of New York. We had a passionate discussion and, as the emotional dynamics of our relationship came to the surface, it became obvious that the issue was one of control. The issue was legalism, not the woman in need. At last I relented and we retraced our footsteps, but she was no longer there. The realization struck me like a lightning bolt: I was not free to love.

So, according to Paul, the purpose of freedom is love. Christians are not to be controlled by law or by their emotions. Through our acceptance by the Father in Jesus Christ, we can love with a full heart. This is the kind

of love that is described in the words of Jesus, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Most of us are familiar with the parable of the good Samaritan. On one occasion an expert in the law asked Jesus what he should do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him what was in the law, and the lawyer answered correctly, quoting the great commandment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. But when the man asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told him the parable of the good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite failed to love even though they kept Torah, but the Samaritans loved even though that expression went against every cultural distinction that was his and it might have cost him his own life.

God's unlimited, unconditional love melts away all resentments and anger and makes us free to love beyond the need to please or find approval. Henry Nouwen describes this kind of love in these words: "The leap of faith always means loving without expecting to be loved in return, giving without wanting to receive, inviting without hoping to be invited, holding without asking to be held. And every time I make a little leap, I catch a glimpse of the One who runs out to me and invites me into his joy, the joy in which I can find not only myself, but also my brothers and sisters" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 86). Living under the law does not yield the good Samaritan-kind of love, the Christ kind of love. This is why we have been set free in Christ.

And here is the ironic thing: We become free from living under the law in order that the entire law might be fulfilled in us through Christ. This twist completely silences the advocates of law who are scared of giving people Christian freedom, and does away with the fear that things might spin out of control. The reality is that when we become free to love according to God's purpose we will end up fulfilling the law in a much deeper way. "[Freedom] does not mean that we are free to disregard or disobey the law. On the contrary, although we cannot gain acceptance by keeping the law, yet once we have been accepted we shall keep the law out of love for Him who has accepted us and has given us His Spirit to enable us to keep it" (John Stott, *Galatians*, 143).

Finally, in verse 15 Paul gives a warning concerning our Christian freedom. According to the apostle, if we do not love, if we do not use our freedom properly, then the community will self-destruct. His metaphor is graphic: "if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another." Paul is talking about cannibalism—biting, swallowing, eating and devouring. The result is annihilation, total consumption. Notice again the assumption of community that is expressed by the words, "one another."

If we do not give ourselves to love, things can go in the opposite direction. Efforts to control sin can have

more devastating effects than the sin itself. Rather than building itself up in love, the community feeds one on another. People become critical, judgmental, selfish and complaining, pointing out each other's faults, consuming one another. Such behavior spreads like cancer, destroying healthy cells, and the body dies.

Oftentimes we see this very thing occurring in the church. Brothers and sisters in Christ destroy one another with critical words, and the church divides and ultimately dies. This an apt description also for a family in which love is not expressed. Parents and children, brothers and sisters wage war, holding grudges, tearing one another apart with harsh words. "Freedom that is not expressed in love annihilates: We must love one another, or die" (W.H. Auden, quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 154). Freedom achieves humanity and avoids bestiality only when it is used in acts of love. "Freedom without love," said Ellul, "resembles a blind man without a guide" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 154).

Let us reflect for a moment now on the glorious purpose behind our freedom to love.

Although there are two sons in the story of the prodigal, the account centers around the love of the father towards both sons and his desire to confer upon them the status of sonship. In our journey towards freedom we have seen that the key thing is grasping our sonship in Christ. However, the journey does not end there. God not only wants us to experience the joy of returning home and being sons, he wants us to become like the father who loved both sons equally, and welcomed them home and called for a celebration. God calls us to spiritual fatherhood. This is the purpose of our freedom.

This makes perfect sense. We can illustrate it from life. A child who is under rules struggles against what he deems to be constraints, but once he becomes a son in the house, he cares for the house in the same manner as his father. A child who becomes a partner in the family business and is no longer an employee cares for the business in the same manner as the father. In the same way, the child of God who becomes a son of God shares the nature and perspective of the Father. And in Christ, we are becoming like the Father. Jesus said, "If you have seen me, then you have seen the Father. The Father and the Son are one." Once we become a son in the Son of God, we also become one with the Father. And just as in adulthood we start looking like our physical mothers and fathers, as we grow spiritually we start looking like our heavenly Father. These stages of maturity are mentioned by John in his first epistle when he writes to little children, to young men (sons), and to fathers.

This is an amazing truth. When I first started to think about this, a book by Henri Nouwen on the prodigal son confirmed my feelings. As I began to experience sonship with the Father, I felt more freedom in my rela-

tionships. My perspective began to change, particularly in my relationships with my wife and children. As the dynamics of emotional control lessened, I not only found freedom, I began to experience freedom to love unconditionally. When I received the Father's love, I sensed I was called to give the Father's love in return. The result is that in recent months I have begun to have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a father.

Living under law is a convenient way to avoid loving like the Father, a convenient way not to risk, sacrifice and die. Fatherhood can be a lonely role at times. A father has to wait for his child's return. He has to listen to the anger of his child without striking back. He hurts but does not retaliate. He loves in the silence of his own heart. We are foolish if we think that we can keep the law and satisfy God without cost to ourselves. We desperately desire freedom, but do we want the freedom to love, do we want to go all the way and become like the Father?

Henri Nouwen has a helpful word in this regard:

Do I want to be like the Father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just

the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?

Isn't there a subtle pressure in both the Church and society to remain a dependent child? Hasn't the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn't our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in childish self-gratification? Who has truly challenged us to liberate ourselves from immature dependencies and to accept the burden of responsible adults? (*Return*, 122).

If we misuse freedom we will end up indulging the flesh. But the very purpose for freedom is that we might love with the love of the Father. If we claim both our sonship and our fatherhood, we won't fear living free from the law.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, let us think about this glorious call to freedom in Christ. We should not feed on one another, as Paul admonishes, but on Christ, his broken body, his shed blood. In Jesus we become sons and daughters of God in order that we might share the fullness of the Father. As we partake of the elements, let us enter into the divine call to love one another. In Jesus, we have the love of the Father. And in him, we can love like the Father.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino