

“Christian Freedom”

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¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, 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.

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:1, 13-25)

I think most of us have a love/hate relationship with rules.

As achiever-types who want to succeed, we love the rules. If we are trying to solve a complex math problem, we need to know the proper order of operations, because if we add or subtract or multiply and divide in the wrong sequence our final answer will be wrong. If we are writing a paper and want to get an A, we have to pay close attention to the question being asked and the guidelines the professor has given us for the essay. If we want to excel in basketball, tennis, or any other sport, we have to know the rules about how points are scored and penalties are assessed. Rules define the game, which means that, if we know and follow the rules, we can be confident that we have an accurate measure of how well we are doing, an objective means of comparison to the competition, and the best chance of success in our endeavor.¹ In these cases, rules are our friends.

On the other hand, we can sometimes find rules to be overly-constricting or even unfair. By their very nature, rules take certain choices off the table. This is not always a bad thing. For example, I happen to think that requiring everyone to drive on one side of the road is a pretty good rule – one that takes relatively little effort to obey, but saves a great deal of frustration and pain. But all rules, by their very nature, place some limits on freedom, and that is not always a good thing. Some rules are based on misinformation or flawed assumptions. Some laws work in rural areas but wreak havoc in heavily populated ones. And some laws are outright unjust in the way they privilege a few at the expense of the many.

¹ Jill E. McCormick, “Why Rule-Following Achievers Actually Hate Following Rules,” <https://www.jillemccormick.com/ihaterules/>, posted November 9, 2016.



As we all know, the Supreme Court of the United States changed a number of our country's rules this past week with rulings that have changed some of the freedoms that millions of Americans rely upon. Some people love these changes and are celebrating them. A great many others do not love them. They are confused, hurt, frustrated, and angry about the loss of freedoms they have relied upon, freedoms that they consider to be an important part of their personhood. So, after the week we have had in America, are we more free or less free than we were last Sunday? It very much depends on who you ask.

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul seems to understand the love/hate relationship we have with rules. The Galatians were being taught that there were certain rules they needed to follow – mostly Old Testament rules that helped determine who was in and who was out... who was faithful and who was not. And there was great comfort in that. If faith was a test, they wanted to pass. If faith was a game, they wanted to win. These rules offered a measure of how well they were doing, an objective means of comparison to others, and – so they were told -- the best chance of success in their faith.

I get the appeal. I understand the motivation. On more than one occasion, I've had church members say to me, in one way or another, that they wished I would preach more on ethical issues. What they seemed to be asking for was for me to get up in the pulpit and tell them what to do and what not to do. They were looking for a kind of checklist for faith, so they could check off the boxes and have a measure of how well they were doing.

Interestingly, Paul rejected that understanding of the rules. He actually saw that kind of reliance on rules to determine who was part of the church and who was not as a problem. In fact, he considered that level of reliance on the law to be a form of slavery. Christ, he said, had delivered God's people from that kind of oppression and brought a new freedom to the people of God. God, he said, was doing a completely new thing in Christ. "*Christ has set us free,*" Paul wrote. You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. So "*stand firm, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" It is an important concept for Paul, but also a nuanced one. What is this new Christian freedom, as Paul understands it? How do we define it?

Generally speaking, one way to understand freedom is that it is "***the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.***"² According to this understanding, freedom is the right to do what we want without anyone getting in our way.

The famous Presbyterian preacher Peter Marshall used to tell a story about a little boy in kindergarten who got frustrated that playtime was always structured, planned, and supervised. He didn't want to play group games. He wanted freedom. He wanted the ability to do whatever he wanted out on the playground. Finally, the teacher said OK. "Amuse yourself," she said. "You can do whatever you want to do."

It was not long before the little boy came sheepishly back to the teacher. "What can I do now?" he asked. "I don't want to do what I want to do."³

This definition of freedom doesn't work that well in a community, especially a community founded on love of God and love of neighbor. It's not an "anything goes" kind of thing. How we act is important. How we treat each other is important. We all need some limits. So, Paul moves this definition to the side. "*Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,*" he says, "*but through love become slaves to one another.*" Even in a state

²https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+freedom&rlz=1C1GCEU_enUS820US820&oq=definition+freedom&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j0l5.3057j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

³ Peter Marshall and Catherine Marshall, *The Best of Peter Marshall* (Lincoln, VA: Chosen Books, 1983), 212.

of Christian freedom, we are still subject to God's authority, still accountable to others, still committed to the moral order of God's creation.

This was a lesson the Prodigal Son had to learn the hard way. You remember the story, the boy in the parable of Jesus who didn't want to stick around the farm with his father and older brother doing the work of tending the gardens and vineyards. No, he wanted to go out into the world to be his own boss and do his own thing. Out there, he does discover that he is free to break the rules, but he also discovers that he is not free from the consequences of breaking the rules. He is free to eat whatever he wants to eat, but he is not free of indigestion and weight gain.⁴ He is free to stay out all night, but he is not free from illness and fatigue. He is free to spend his money on whatever his heart desires, but he is not free from the unavoidable truth that his money has limits, and that all that glitters is not gold. And in the end, he discovers that this kind of freedom is ultimately empty. In the end, he says, "I took what I wanted, and now I find I no longer want what I took."⁵

So, the idea that we should be able to do whatever we want, whenever we want, is not God's idea of freedom. A better understanding goes something like this: freedom is liberation from bondage, "***the absence of subjection to domination or despotism.***"⁶

This view of freedom is not about entitlement or self-indulgence, but rather about the end of oppression. It is about being released from some kind of chains that have bound us. This, I suggest to you, is the kind of freedom Paul had in mind. In Christ, we are freed from the shackles of sin, freed from the mortal limits of death, but that does not mean we can now do whatever we want. Having been freed from one kind of slavery, we voluntarily bind ourselves to a new way of life – one that elevates love for God and for others. It is more fluid and flexible, but it still has shape and integrity. And it still rests on a solid foundation. "*You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; [but] do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence; [instead] through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*"

I love the way that a pastor from Australia, Andrew Prior, describes this new way of life. The freedom offered by Christ, he says, is a freedom from something, but it is more about a freedom to do something new. The way he experiences this gift is in, to use his words, a "freedom from the need to prove myself... [freedom from the need] to be better, to be right, to be 'good enough,' or to defend myself."⁷

Those are shackles that I think we can all understand. We all have that voice inside of us that wonders, "Am I really good enough?" We all look at mistakes we have made, the broken places in our lives that we know are kind of our fault, and we imagine a great scoreboard in heaven, and we wonder if we are winning or losing... we wonder if we have accrued enough points to get in.

These are exactly the kind of chains that Christ came to break, but it can be hard for us to accept, especially for us achievers who like to know exactly where we stand and want to be able to measure our success with some objectivity. Without the rules, without clearly written guidelines of what we can do and cannot do, how do we know if we are OK?

⁴ *Id.* at 208.

⁵ *Id.* at 212.

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/freedom>

⁷ Andrew Prior, "It's not about you!" <https://onemansweb.org/galatians-5-1-26.html>

That's easy, Paul said. You will be able to tell. If you embrace the freedom that Christ offers, you will know you are heading in a good direction or a bad one... and you will know because of your "fruits." If your life is bearing fruit that doesn't smell right or taste right – if you find yourself feeling mostly strained, jealous, angry, broken-hearted or conflicted, then those are road signs telling you that are probably on the wrong track.

On the other hand, if you are using your freedom well you will know that too, because the fruits of your life will be very different. If you are being led by the Spirit, Paul says, the fruits of your life will be amazing things, wonderful things, happy things like *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*

Remember, it wasn't a rule or a law that sent the Prodigal Son home; it was the moment when he looked at his life and he knew in his bones, "This cannot be right. This is not how I should feel. This is not how I should be making others feel." It was the bad fruit that his life was bearing that made him want something better, that turned him around and sent him home to his Divine Parent. And even as he went back to that farm that he once saw as a prison, he freely went back, ready to submit himself again in love to his family.

Christ sets us free from constant worry about whether we are good enough, free from having to prove ourselves, and free to embrace and pursue good and perfect and heavenly things, for in the kingdom of God, love cannot be wrong... joy cannot be wrong... peace, patience, kindness, generosity... these things will never lead you in the wrong direction, because *"There is no law against such things."*

When it came time to teach our daughters to ride a bike, both times we went to a park. Before we left home, I got out the wrench and I took the training wheels off. Then we loaded the bike into the car and drove to a nearby area that was flat and grassy. They were a little nervous, and I was too. They didn't want to fall, and I didn't want them to get hurt. So, for the first little while, I held on. I ran with them as they got used to the new sensation. Then, after a while, I picked a moment that felt right... and I let them go. If they fell, we tried again. Before long, that key moment came when I let go and they didn't even realize I had. All they felt was the sensation of being completely free and unfettered. They were steering and pedaling all on their own. It was a moment of exhilaration for them, and a moment of great pride for me.

That, I believe, is Paul's understanding of Christian freedom. God liberates us and sets us free to steer, trusting that we will know when we have veered too far off the path. In Christ, God sets us free to live without a set of rules written on paper or parchment, because the real rules – the most important ones – are written on our hearts and in our spirits. Each of us comes equipped with an internal God Compass that we can trust. As long as we keep checking our declination to make sure we know where true north is, we can follow that compass out into the world as far as our legs will carry us.

Or, to put it as Saint Augustine did more than 1600 years ago, "Love, and do what you will. If you wish to hold your peace, hold your peace in love. If you have to cry out, cry out through love. If you correct another, do so with love... Let the root of love be within you, for out of this root can spring nothing but what is good."⁸

This is the kind of freedom God wants us to feel. May God give us the wisdom and the courage to embrace it, in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Spirit who guides us on the way, **Amen.**

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, "Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John," <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm>.