

“What is Freedom?”

This week we celebrate the birthday of our country, the United States of America. We set off fireworks and sing special songs each July 4. Some 243 years ago our forefathers declared they would no longer be subject to the rule of Great Britain. They desired to be free from tyranny and what they considered unfair taxation without representation. Later, when a Constitution was written, the people of the United States were guaranteed freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. Throughout the years of our country, other freedoms have also been recognized.

We must recognize, though, that our freedoms have limits. One cannot yell “fire” in a crowded dark theater when there is no fire. One cannot murder, rape or steal without going to jail. One can face legal liability for slander if false statements are made about someone. Even in freedom of religion, there are restraints. For example, the practice of polygamy in the Mormon Church has been made illegal.

In our passage today from Galatians 5, Paul deals with how Christians live with their freedom. Earlier in his letter he has explained how those who have faith in Jesus Christ as their savior are called to freedom. They no longer have to obey the law to try to get eternal life. In this chapter Paul goes from theology to ethics.

How does one practice their faith in Christ? To Paul theology was of little use if it could not be lived out in the world. What does it actually mean to live a life of freedom? The whole matter is brought to the acid test of daily life and living.

Paul's theology always ran one major danger. If he declared that the end of the reign of law had come, and that the reign of grace had arrived, it was always possible, as William Barclay writes, for some deliberate misinterpreter to say, "That, then, means that I can do what I like; that all the restraints are lifted, and I can follow my inclinations, my passions, my desires, my emotions, wherever they lead me. Law is gone and grace ensures forgiveness anyway."

Paul addresses this lack of ethic with two obligations we have as Christians. First, there is the obligation to God. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart. If God has loved us so much that he sent His son to die for us, then the love of Christ constrains us. One cannot intentionally soil and stain a life which God paid for with His own life.

Second, there is the obligation to our fellow men. We are free, but that freedom is a freedom which loves its neighbor as itself. In our nation, we live by democratic rule. We are fortunate. Even at the time of Christ, people did not enjoy the ability to live by democracy. Many types of government have been tried over the centuries. Monarchy is government by one such as the emperor, the king, the

czar. Monarchy began in the interest of efficiency, for government by committees has always had its drawbacks. Oligarchy means government by the few and can be justified by arguing that only the few are fit to govern. Aristocracy means government by the best, but best is left to be defined. But democracy means government of the people, by the people, for the people. William Barclay puts forth the idea that Christianity is the only true democracy, because in Christianity everyone would think as much of his neighbor as he does himself. We are able to live in a democracy when we understand and practice that we are not free to sin but we, by the grace of God, are free *not* to sin. The Christian is the man who through the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ is so purged of self that he loves his neighbor as himself, a thing which is not possible except for a Christian.

Paul warns the Galatians and us today with a grim bit of advice. “Unless,” he says, “you solve the problem of living together you will make life impossible and unlivable at all.” Selfishness in the end does not exalt a man; it destroys him.

But how does Paul propose that people live with each other in their new freedom? Paul has already rejected the theology that the law can save us. His opponents in Galatia gained acceptance by proposing that rules and regulations were necessary for people to live together. If Paul rejects rules, what is his answer? His answer is that Christians are to live in love, under the guidance of God’s Spirit,

not the law. If you walk by the Spirit, you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

The Holy Spirit, not rules and regulations, gives us this power.

“Flesh” is not just sexual passions. “Flesh” is a comprehensive term for the sphere of autonomous fallen humanity, conceived as standing in opposition to God. “Flesh” asserts itself anywhere that self-seeking human desire opposes itself to the divine will and the wholeness of the community. In vv. 19-21 Paul gives a catalogue of evil things. Envy, backbiting, and competitiveness are just as dangerous to the community as sexual offenses. For years our sexually overstimulated society, including the church, has interpreted “flesh” to be a sexual scandal. But Paul uses the word “flesh” and the offenses that follow to illustrate when one is not walking by the Spirit. “Flesh” is much broader than a lack of sexual ethics.

In v. 22 Paul then writes of the fruit that should be in our lives if we are walking by the Spirit. This fruit is not our own spirit---we cannot do it on our own. It is the Spirit of God within us. Love should set the tone for all that occurs in the community’s life together. The fruit patience is important to think about in today’s world. Generally speaking the word is not used of patience in regard to things or events, but in regard to people. Patience seems to be sorely needed today in our society and church today in which different political opinions are running high. The commentator Chrysostom said that patience is the grace of the man who could

revenge himself and who does not, of the man who is slow to wrath. The most illuminating thing about patience used in the New Testament is the attitude of God and Jesus towards men. If God had been a man He would have taken His hand and wiped out this world long ago; but God has that patience which bears with all our sinning and which will not cast us off. In our lives, in our attitude to and dealings with our fellow human beings, we must reproduce this loving, forbearing, forgiving attitude of God towards ourselves. This is how, through walking by God's Spirit, we live in freedom and love our neighbor as ourself. As we will sing in our closing hymn, we are bound together and live in Christian love, the love that comes to us from the Holy Spirit when we accept Jesus Christ as our savior.