

WHAT IS FREEDOM FOR?

GALATIANS 5:1,13-25
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Welcome to our first Sunday of our summer worship!

This morning's sermon will be brief, as I want to leave room for the focal point of this morning's sermon, which is our coming to the table.

In the time that I have, I want to talk about freedom.

Like many of the best words that we have—words like “hope” and “love” and “peace”—“freedom” is an easy word to misunderstand or abuse.

It's easy to make it a small word—a word that fits into the shape of our own desires and preferences—rather than the expansive thing that God intended it to be.

I specifically want to talk about the contrast between freedom *from* and freedom *for*.

Those two words are very important in how we understand freedom but we often don't pay nearly as much attention to the differences between them as we ought to.

Perhaps a relatively trivial example will make the point. When I was a kid, we didn't tend to have a lot of junk food in the house.

We had pop and chips and candy on special occasions but it wasn't the sort of thing that was just readily available whenever and wherever I wanted it. Much to my chagrin.

When I began to date Naomi as a sixteen year old, I was delighted to discover that her parents had a different philosophy. They had a refrigerator full of pop in the fridge in the basement. They had all kinds of goodies in the pantry—gum, chips, ice cream sandwiches. It was paradise!

So, when I went over to the Naomi's home I enjoyed certain freedoms that I did not have at home. I experienced the absence of constraints.

And boy did I take advantage of this absence. Naomi's parents must have watched in bewildered disbelief as I helped myself to three cans of pop and all kinds of candy and chips and generally gorged myself at the trough.

Looking back on this now, I can say that I had a firm grasp on freedom *from*. But I had little concept that my freedom was *for* anything.

I didn't really appreciate or understand that just because my behaviour wasn't constrained by the absence of certain desirable but unhealthy options (when consumed in excess) that didn't mean that I *should* treat it like a free for all.

I didn't really understand or appreciate that freedom was about more than me and the uninhibited satisfaction of my appetites.

I didn't understand or appreciate that freedom was a gift to be exercised in a healthy and responsible way that enjoyed the occasional treat but also understood that recklessly consuming as much junk food as I could cram into my mouth was not good for my long term health or habit formation.

I didn't understand the crucial difference between freedom *from* and freedom *for*.

Those two little words make all the difference in the world.

In Galatians 5, Paul says that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, he says, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.

Hooray! These words resonate with us in our culture that places such a premium on "freedom."

But, as always, it's worth asking ourselves what we mean when we use the words we do and what Paul meant.

In our cultural context, "freedom" means pretty much exclusively the absence of constraints, whether we're talking about sexual expression, or free speech or entertainment political liberty or whatever.

We love the idea of being unshackled, of being no longer bound by constraints.

We love this idea that there are no more parameters on our behaviour or on who can tell us what to do or be or think.

For us, freedom is about the individual and his or her autonomy. We take it almost as our cultural default now that freedom is about me and my self-expression and my desire and nobody can tell me what to do or think or wear or whatever.

We are the equivalent of a sixteen year old with no self-control gorging ourselves at the trough of desire.

Paul, in contrast, knew that freedom was bigger than this.

It *includes* the absence of constraints, in this case from the requirements of the Jewish law. It was vital for Paul to get the Galatians to understand that following Jesus did *not* entail old Jewish legal requirements! This was one of the main sources of conflict in the church, as we saw in sermons earlier in June.

It was absolutely crucial for Paul that Christ had opened up new realities, new possibilities in the world, that people were free to cross boundaries that we once thought were rigid and impermeable.

We think again of the book of Acts—the story of Peter and Cornelius, the story of the inclusion of the Gentiles, lifting of dietary restrictions, and all these kinds of things.

So there is a freedom *from* the law that is vital and worthy of being celebrated.

But Paul knew that we need to be set free from more than just an external law.

There's another kind of freedom. Freedom from ourselves. Paul uses the language of being enslaved to "the flesh" or to the "sinful nature." This is what the fruit of the spirit is contrasted with.

This is not an external law but an internal one.

We human beings can be enslaved by many things, can't we? We can be enslaved by the tyranny of desire, which is every bit as effective a taskmaster as a legal code on stone or in a book.

Look at the list in our text today:

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

What do each of these have in common? They assume that the self is the center around which everything else must orbit.

Sexual sin is about satisfying the self with no thought for the God-given parameters for healthy sexual expression.

Idolatry and sorcery refuse to acknowledge God.

Jealousy, anger, dissensions, factions – the self and its grievances take center stage.

Envy. The self does not get what it wants and looks greedily at others.

Drunkenness, carousing. Personal pleasure becomes the driving force in our lives.

We don't like to talk about our "sinful natures" any more, but we need this language to describe something real about how we understand and sometimes abuse freedom.

In our text today, Paul is not saying, "freedom has come in Christ, so do whatever you want!"

He's rather saying, "Freedom has come in Christ, and you're free now to become what you were made to be. You are free to no longer live according to the law, whether an external law or slavery to our inner impulses."

Freedom *from* is important. But it's only a starting point, not an end goal.

If freedom *from* doesn't lead to freedom *for*, it becomes a hollow, selfish thing that shrinks this beautiful life-giving word down to the size of the self and its desires.

And the self and its desires is a very small thing.

If we stop at freedom *from*—as so many in our culture do—then we remain immature and selfish, gorging ourselves on junk and making ourselves sick in the process.

So, what are we free *for*?

Well, we are free to live into the fruit of the Spirit. This is the point of freedom.

Yesterday I was honoured to officiate at the wedding of Michael Granzow and Madeleine Baldwin. At one point in the devotional, I read from 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant...

I remarked that the words are so familiar to us that it is sometimes difficult to hear just how profound and revolutionary it would be if people actually loved like this.

I suspect the same is true with the fruit of the Spirit.

I want you to listen to these words as an invitation to the exercise of your freedom in Christ. And with each word, I want you to think of an area of your life that could perhaps use a bit more of this fruit.

Love.

Joy.

Peace.

Patience.

Kindness.

Goodness.

Faithfulness.

Gentleness.

Self Control.

This is what our freedom is for. Can you think of *any* area of life—your marriage, your family, your workplace, your advocacy for social causes, your school, your devotional life... Our church. Our city. Our nation. Our world.

Can you think of *any* area whatsoever, that would not be improved and made more whole and life-giving if our lives as followers of Jesus were increasingly characterized by this kind of fruit? If *these* kinds of things were what people instinctively thought of when they heard the word “Christian?”

I can't.

This does not mean, incidentally, that God wants us all to look exactly the same. The point of this passage is not to say that God wants our freedom to produce “fruit robots” or something like that.

This fruit will be expressed in unique and beautiful ways in each one of us as it is projected out into the world through our own personalities and contexts in which God has placed us.

Each one of us will have different arenas within which to cultivate these gifts, different relationships within which to help bring them out of others.

The irony in Paul's entire argument, in the shape of the Christian life as a whole, is that we are set free in glorious and profoundly liberating ways, but we are set free to be

constrained again—not by external legal codes, not by the tyranny of our small and selfish desires, but by the law of love.

One final note.

It's interesting that Paul describes the things that come out of our sinful natures as “works” and the things the Spirit desires, the things we were created to be, as “fruit.”

The word “work” can connote duty—to the grim exercise of obeying the demands of external or internal laws.

Fruit points to growing things, to possibility, to things that are attractive and taste good!

And fruit is new each season. It grows again and again and again.

Ultimately, these are fruits that only God can grow in us.

Our job is to be receptive, to be open, to participate with God in growing good things in us and for us, in the world and for the world.

Amen.

