

## Spirit-led Freedom.

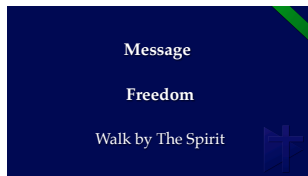
June 2019

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 NRSV

<sup>1</sup> For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

<sup>13</sup> For 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. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' <sup>15</sup> If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For 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. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, 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.



### Introduction

I recently heard a description of the desires common to all people. I have been pondering this and as we are a multi-cultural congregation I am going to ask you about this list of three universal needs.

As I describe them would you ask yourself, which is most important to you?

From the moment we are born we need community. That's the first need I want to point to but it may not be the most important? Community is about being connected to other people and sharing life with them. However we feel about it, people need people.

Somewhere along life's journey there comes a need for meaning or significance. Some people seem to need this more than others. What is truth and what makes life worth living? What is there to inspire and comfort me through life and my existence? How do I decide how to live?

The third common aspiration is freedom. People everywhere have an aversion to bondage or captivity. We want to live life in freedom - even if 'freedom' means different things to different people.

I have listed Significance, Community and Freedom as things every human-being wants and needs in some measure. One thing to note is that all three of these are Gospel issues. They are all right and good

#### What we all need

- Community
- Meaning & Significance
- Freedom

Now comes the question:

**Q:** How would you prioritize these three things for yourself?

I expect people from different cultures and backgrounds might have different priorities?

Priorities?

- Freedom #1
- Community
- Meaning & Significance

- Q:** Who would prioritize Freedom as their first value ahead of Community and Significance/Meaning?
- A:** That is a typical Western stance or a ‘right-wing’ emphasis.

**Q:** Who would prioritize Community as their first value?

**A:** In today’s world that is a more typically Eastern response or a ‘left-wing’ emphasis being more collective than individual.

Priorities?

- Community #1
- Meaning & Significance
- Freedom

Priorities?

- Meaning & Significance #1
- Community
- Freedom

- Q:** Who would prioritize Significance or Meaning as their first concern?
- A:** In today’s world that is found in theocracies such as Iran or Sudan – nations pre-occupied with religion or ideology.

If we compare and contrast, broad brushstrokes can be made.

- West: #1 Freedom *Mainly individual is a fixation?* #2 Community –*Society- Does it even exist?* #3 Significance –*Philosophy has all but given up.*
- Asia: #1 Community #2 Significance #3 Freedom
- Also: #1 Significance #2 Community #3 Freedom *eg Iran, Medieval Europe, North Korea*

Typicals:

- West = Freedom, Community, Significance
- East = Community, Significance, Freedom
- Also = Significance, Community, Freedom

Africa?

- Community
- Meaning & Significance
- Freedom

- Q:** Can someone suggest what priority might be typical across Africa? What’s most important there?
- A:** ??? *Answer offered was ‘community as #1’*

The Bible speaks about all three concerns. They are issues and fruits.

Following Jesus, Christianity has them linked together in a single whole so that you cannot progress one of these without the other two. They are all salvation issues.

The way I see Paul processing this in his letters he runs:

#1 **Significance** - *The Gospel of Jesus crucified and risen therefore:*

#2 **Freedom** - *Freedom from sin, bondage and the Law / religion*

*and,*

#3 **Community** - *Living the life together to the glory of God.*

#### St Paul's Gospel

- Significance  
*Therefore -*
- Community  
*and*
- Freedom

Maybe that is because that was his process from meeting the risen Lord and being knocked over by the truth to find freedom and new community.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to living the baptized life they are together as a trinity. Significance (Truth and Meaning), Freedom and Community all flow together and sharpen each other. They cannot be pursued in isolation.

That exposes the Western madness we see running today. Freedom is not everything and cannot be held in isolation!

#### Text

So with that in our mind, hear these words offered to new believers who were getting caught up in legalism and religiosity. Galatians 5:

*Galatians 5:1, 13-15*

<sup>1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

<sup>13</sup>For 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. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' <sup>15</sup>If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

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Whatever form it may take, the yoke of slavery is always waiting for us.

God's purpose for us is freedom with in the lightly loaded and well fitting Yoke of Christ. We need to understand the quality of this freedom.

The Freedom received in Christ is the freedom to be the person God made you to be and to serve him as a unique in the image of God as only you can do. That is represented by the Yoke of Jesus as he modeled it.

Paul tells people in his day -as he would need to tell the average Westerner today- "Freedom is not in doing what you want or doing what comes naturally."

"Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (v. <sup>13a</sup>)

It is not about freedom for the pursuit of happiness. That is something else and more like some fake freedom of self-absorption. That is not what Jesus hung on the cross and rose from the tomb for.

Paul then makes a link that engages challenge faced by everyone on the planet:

**Q:** How can I be free in community? I want friends but other people crimp my freedom.

**A:** ... <sup>13b</sup> through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

<sup>1</sup> No surprise: "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." - John 8:32

Christ has won this freedom that he shares with us that is lived out in community through love by choosing to become servants/slaves of one another.

So let's bring this home:

Church is not a place to do what you want and get what you want.

That's not freedom in Christ lived out as God intends.

In Christ we are made free from self-absorption and all that comes with it to love and serve others.

A contemporary phrase brings this to life: In Christ you are liberated to 'Get over yourself'<sup>2</sup>

Thinking too highly of and too much about ourselves can be a bondage, a relational block. Being self-pre-occupied ties us up and stops us from serving others.

Christ liberates us from selfish bondages to reach out beyond ourselves and serve others.

That is an example of Christian freedom that serves community and witnesses to the truth and meaning of Christ.

There are two things that come against this or two things that derail freedom:

- 1) The first threat to freedom in Christ is legalism. Legalism reduces love to compliance with rules. Legalism erodes our appreciation for the victory of Jesus that he shares with us to love and serve God and our neighbour as ourselves. Self-important legalism is always waiting to excuse people from loving others as God desires.
  - a. The political expression of this legalism comes typically from the political left where love of neighbour is institutionalized and enforced with high taxes.
- 2) The second or flip-side threat to freedom in Christ is libertine self-indulgence to do whatever you want for yourself. Paul's term for this impulse is the 'flesh'. It's doing what our human weakness and appetites desire without regard for our neighbour.
  - a. The political expression of this is more towards the political right where individual desires are fiercely defended despite community needs so taxes are kept low and the rich get richer.

Two Dangers to Freedom in Christ

Legalism  
or  
Self indulgence

So understanding that in Christ the baptized are set free to live as the image of God in loving service of God and neighbour without shame, guilt or condemnation we recognize that legalism and fleshy self-indulgence come against this freedom to tie us up all over again. This happens in churches as well which is why Paul writes about it.

**Q:** So what is the way forward? -How to be free and remain free?

**A:** Let's hear it from Paul in the next verses:

<sup>2</sup> This is about no longer thinking that you are more important than others, especially when complaining about something.

*Galatians 5:1, 16-18*

<sup>16</sup>But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

<sup>16</sup>But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

This is so powerful!

To maintain and enjoy the freedom of the children of God, walk by the Spirit!

The Holy Spirit is there for the baptized to lead us in the God won freedom of Christ.

The Holy Spirit will not lead you into self-indulgent fleshy living which is not freedom as Christ provides. He will not lead you to surrender to compulsion, or accommodation of animal instincts and immaturity. This is what the advertising industry works to arouse.

The Spirit will not lead us into anything that is addictive or harmful to ourselves or others.

On the other hand, Legalism, whether that is with reference to the Law of Moses or laws you make up for yourself, does not support true freedom either. Paul says the Holy Spirit takes us beyond law. Legalism leads to being judgmental thinking as people score each other. Legalism cannot achieve love for the unlovely who happens to be our brother or sister in Christ. The Holy Spirit can and does.

So to summarize the message of Galatians 5 for us:

*For freedom Christ has set us free so we stand firm in that freedom and do not submit again to any yoke of slavery.*

*We hold this Christ given freedom by walking by the Holy Spirit. We avoid fake freedoms derived from acting on selfish desires of the flesh that actually keep us from doing the things we really want to do as children of God. At the same time, led by the Spirit, we avoid legalism and don't need that crutch any more. It's walk by the Spirit I say!*

### **Application:**

**Q:** So how does that work?

- How do you live freely through walking by the Spirit?
- How do you avoid being seduced by your own fears and desires to even consider that to be freedom?
- How do you not fall into legalism as if you can control yourself and others as well by management?

**A:** In Romans 8 Paul is running a similar discussion and he says this:

<sup>9</sup>You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

**Q:** How does the Spirit of God come to dwell in you?

**A:** You come to Jesus and welcome him in.

It's a matter of the heart, you invite him in and he starts surprising you.

A few weeks ago on Pentecost Sunday I preached about how the Holy Spirit often surprises people. That was certainly the experience at the first Pentecost and the trend continued.

Our own fleshy desires do not surprise us. We know our own secret cravings. The demands of any law do not surprise us. They are often written down for all to know.

But the Holy Spirit is a surprise agent who works within us and among to move things as we might not expect it, when we might not expect it.

I would say that a sign of the Holy Spirit being at work is that everyone is surprised and in that surprise he gains our attention. He takes us 'over ourselves' into God, if we let Him.

Walking by the Spirit is about staying close to that sense of Godly surprise.

Walking by the Spirit is responding well to the surprises God brings by his Spirit.

It's about being nudged or tickled out of our inclinations to fleshy self-indulgence or legalism.

To take stock of this, ask yourself this diagnostic question:

**Q:** When did I last adjust my walk because I was surprised by the Holy Spirit?

**A:** That will tell you something. Can you remember?

Let me share some recent surprises:

On Pentecost Sunday Barbara and I offered to pray with people in a traditional format with the anointing of oil. I thought that was a good day to do so Barbara and I set ourselves up at the front as priests with our blessed-oils and invited people to come for a fresh infilling.

Then the surprises xs.

While the Worship-via-music Team were playing the song 'Oceans' I began to feel as if I were in an ocean.<sup>3</sup> There was spiritual current swirling around. I felt waves as I remember from the South Pacific. God's Spirit was moving around us.

I had not expected this.

Then I could 'see' the Holy Spirit landing on people.

**Q:** How can you 'see' that?

**A:** It feels like electricity and it looks a bit like that hitting people.

This was rolling along when I became aware that someone who looked like Lynn Sadok had fallen backwards and a number of people were rushing to the scene.

I was surprised that this happened here on a Sunday morning but I was not surprised that it happened. This is common a manifestation of God at work.

I want to advise that if this happens again it is not a crisis. As with St Paul, the Holy Spirit is still taking people to the ground and doing deep work in people while asleep. In the 1990s this came to be termed 'carpet time'. So if this happens again there are two things to remember:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfpEefKiG2I>

1. Someone will be in charge. Don't feel you need to rescue the situation. It's may be a surprise but not a medical emergency.
2. Leave the person be to rest in the Spirit. They are in God's hands and we have clean warm carpet. You don't wake people in the middle of surgery!

So that was a bit surprising!

Then last week we heard Gulzhan's testimony. It was so inspiring!

When she had finished I saw the opportunity for people to be encouraged by the part of her testimony that involved being between belief and unbelief, a sort of no-man's land.

So I invited anyone in that place to come with the intention that Gulzhan pray for them. I sensed she had something to bring to them.

Gulzhan asked to pray in Russian and then it happened. From the first syllable in Russian the Holy Spirit fell with such force that it felt to me like water canon had been let loose on me. This was the Oceans experience times 10.

That was another Holy Spirit surprise. And yet, this is true to what the Holy Spirit does in scripture and previous experience: Where a pure Gospel witness is given, the Spirit comes in power.

This week I found a verse that described this well. It's about the so-called 'Gentile Pentecost' in Caesarea in Acts 10.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

Acts 10:44

I asked at the time and a few people responded but let me ask again those who were here last week:

**Q:** Who else was surprised by the Holy Spirit in that moment?

**Conclusion:**

To walk by the Spirit there will be surprises. We need to embrace them. Responding to God's grace in Holy Spirit Surprises keep us on the path of freedom.