

“Set Free to Live”

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New Testament Lesson: Galatians 5:1, 13-17

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 16

When I turned 16, I couldn't wait to get my driver's license. Now that's freedom, baby! For freedom, Christ has set us free. But kids nowadays, they don't know a good thing when they see it. Just kidding.

But really, did you know that teenagers nowadays are saying 'no thanks' when it comes to getting their driver's license? Yup. Back in the '80s when I turned 16, 80 percent of 18 year olds had a license. By 2014, that number dropped to 60 percent.

Many teens say driving is too expensive these days, what with insurance and gasoline and auto repairs. Furthermore, researches believe teens are too busy to bother with driving. And besides, they can still get mom and dad, grandma and grandpa to drive them around.

Freedom; it's a funny thing – it always comes with obligations and responsibilities. Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at freedom. It's the focus of a three-week sermon series titled Set Free to Live – today's sermon title – Set Free to Love, next week; and Set Free to Be, the week after.

In today's reading, the Apostle Paul says to the Galatians, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." That's kind of an odd thing to say. It's kind of like saying, "For eating, food has been provided" – duh! But Paul was no fool. Paul said this weird thing about freedom being for the sake of freedom for a reason. Paul said this because more and more of the people coming to Christ in Galatia were Gentiles, and the Gentiles had more freedoms in life than the Jewish converts to the faith, who still practiced their orthodox, Jewish traditions even though they were now followers of Christ.

So the question on the street corners of Galatia was, do these Gentiles have to adopt Jewish traditions; shouldn't they have to adhere to Jewish law if they are going to be part of our new religion. Answering this question, Paul says (quote), "... The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Love of neighbor and love of self, that's the key to the freedom Christ brings us.

Last week, we celebrated the Resurrection of the Lord, through which we have freedom from sin and death and the brokenness of this world. What Paul is saying is once you've been given that freedom – the freedom to live life differently because of your faith in Christ – don't let go of that, don't give it up for anything in the world. "Stand firm," says Paul, "... and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters!"

Now you see why Paul was the first Evangelical preacher, God bless him. Because of Christ, we are free to live and to love and to be, free to be ourselves without shame and with no reservations, as long as we are being the best Christians we can be.

So what does that freedom look like? Well, take for example, the freedom that billionaire Warren Buffett displayed in giving 85 percent of his fortune to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For those of you who think it's easy for a man like Buffett to give away \$31 billion to charity, it's not.

Remember what Jesus said about the rich man – it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. And current research finds this to be true. Studies show that, in the years following the recession, higher income people actually gave less to charity than poorer people.

Why might that be? What motivates someone to give? Bill Gates sees lots of reasons people might give to his foundation.¹

Some use economic arguments, saying if we cure disease then the country is more productive. Some use security arguments, saying if we don't cure disease then instability increases. Others use neighborhood arguments that point to diseases spreading from one part of town to another, from one country to another. But none of these arguments is the right one according to Bill Gates.

Gates says that the right argument is that someone's child is sick, and whether that child lives in the United States or in Africa or where-have-you, "... that child's life is no less valuable than the life of anyone else. The world," says Gates, "has plenty of resources to ... solve (such) problems."

That is the "Set Free to Live" argument. That's the argument that says we are free to live differently than the world would have us live, we are free to cure diseases across the globe because Christ lives in us. We are free to set aside how the world reacts to things and, instead, react like Christians.

What does a "Christian" reaction look like? J.I Packer tells us in his book "Knowing and Doing the Will of God."² Packer says: "Love is the Christlike reaction to people's malice. Joy is the Christlike reaction to depressing circumstances. Peace is the Christlike reaction to troubles, threats and ... anxiety. Patience is the Christlike reaction to all that is maddening. Kindness is the Christlike reaction to all that are unkind. Goodness is the Christlike reaction to bad people and bad behavior. Faithfulness and gentleness are the Christlike reactions to lies and fury. Self-control is the Christlike reaction to every situation that goads you to lose your cool"

¹ Brussat, Frederic, and Mary Ann Brussat. "The spiritual practice of generosity." *Spirituality & Practice Web Site*, spiritualityandpractice.com, via Homiletics Online.

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1995), 293.

For us to live like that – to exhibit Christlike responses when our whole world is shaken – well, that takes a certain something. It takes the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and trusting in that.

“Live by the Spirit,” says Paul. This is how God made us. We are made to live by the Spirit and not by the will of the flesh or the ways of the world.

“For what the flesh desires,” says Paul, “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,” from being a slave to self-indulgences. You see, we only know how to be good because Christ showed us – and we see that in one another.

(That’s why Paul says) “Become slaves to one another,” becomes slaves to your love for one another. Let love run your life! Can you imagine it – everyone having the best interest of the other person in mind and at heart at all times, in every situation?!? Why it would be heaven on earth. And that’s just what is available to us in Christ.

As another of the Apostles tells us, in the Gospel According to Luke (17:20-21), Jesus was asked by the Pharisees about the Kingdom of God – which ushers in heaven on earth – and Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact,” says Jesus, “the kingdom of God is among you.” The Kingdom of God is among you right now. Or, it’s not.

It all depends on how we treat one another. Will you live in the freedom of Christ, free to give of yourself for the sake of others, or will you live for you and you alone?

For us as individuals, that’s an impossible choice. Basic survival instincts force us to protect ourselves – we can’t help it. But as a family of faith – as the church – we can trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to move among us, strengthening the individual through the faithful presence and wisdom of the whole, the whole body of Christ.

Christ did not come for any one individual to be set free. Christ came for the people of God, for all people, all people who would trust in him. Will you – will I – trust in God. Will we claim the freedom – and the responsibility – to conduct our lives as a people who truly are set free to live, to live like Christians. And what might that look like in your life this week? What might that look like in our church?

Next week, we will explore these questions further. So pray about that this week: how can you – how can I, how can we – live like Christians who are free to give ourselves for others?

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Amazing and often surprising God, you come to us in so many ways. Sometimes you surprise us in the majestic moment of a sunrise or a simple smile or a kind word or a friendly soul to share a meal with.

Guide us, great God, with your love and your wisdom. Enable us to become even more aware of you and of your presence in others.

Help us, too, to open our minds and hearts to your presence in unexpected places, even as we thank you for being there for us in our place of need.

We pray for all those in need of your comforting presence and healing touch.

We pray all this in the powerful name of the risen Lord, as we raise our voice in song and our eyes to heaven sing the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**