

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 22, 2009**

THE FREEDOM TO SERVE

Galatians 5:13-15

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE READING

In the last several weeks (not including last Sunday when Pastor Bob preached on “Making the Gospel ‘At Home’” in our worship and life as a church) I have been talking with you about freedom – about the freedom we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. If Abraham Lincoln is the Great Emancipator, Jesus is the Greater Emancipator. In Him and through faith in Him, we have freedom from the power of sin and guilt in our lives. We have freedom from the demands and requirements of the law as a way of earning God’s favor. In Christ there is freedom from fear. In Christ there is freedom from worry. In Christ we have the freedom of forgiveness – the freedom of being forgiven by God and the freedom of forgiving others. Jesus is and will always be the Greater Emancipator.

Today I want to explore with you the freedom we have in Christ that Paul highlights in Galatians 5. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians has been called “The Magna Charta of Christian Liberty” for its bold and clear declaration of the freedom found in the gospel of Jesus Christ – and found only in Christ. It is found nowhere else. It is found in nothing and no one else. Only in Christ. In Christ alone. None of us is truly free until Christ has set us free – until Christ has set us free from the burden of our sin and guilt.

The freedom for which Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1) is not only freedom from a guilty conscience. It is not only freedom from the burden of our sin. It is not only freedom from the necessity of obedience to the demands of the law in order to win God’s favor. It is not only freedom of access to God through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is all of these, praise God. But it is also this: It is the freedom to serve. It is the freedom to live a life of service to God and to serve one another in love.

I invite you to follow along as I read our text for today from Galatians 5. It is just three verses – verses 13-15. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word.

Freedom is the universal longing of the human heart. It’s true – people everywhere want to be free. It’s true of people in China, in Cuba, in Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan, as well as right here in the U. S.

In his State of the Union Address in 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt articulated four essential human freedoms:

- Freedom of speech and expression
- Freedom of worship

- Freedom from want
- Freedom from fear

The first two (freedom of speech and worship) are firmly entrenched in our nation's Constitution. The last two (freedom from want and fear) are goals to which people everywhere aspire.

But freedom can be easily misunderstood. It is often misused or abused. We may sometimes have a mistaken idea of the nature and purpose of freedom. Paul recognized that and addressed it here in Galatians 5.

WHAT FREEDOM IS NOT

He helps us see, first of all, what freedom is not. Look at verse 13: It is not a license or excuse to indulge our sinful nature. It is not a license to do whatever we want or whatever feels good, regardless of its effect on ourselves or others, or its effect on our relationship with God. The freedom Christ gives is not a license to indulge ourselves and our selfish desires. The freedom we have in Christ does not mean it is OK...

- To use or abuse illegal drugs
- To get drunk – or to drink and drive
- To “hook up” sexually with a friend
- To have an affair
- To visit porn sites on the web
- To lose your temper
- To cheat on your taxes or pad your expense account
- To lie or steal
- To abuse a family member (or anyone) in any way – physically, sexually, verbally or emotionally
- To treat others as objects to be used for your personal benefit
- To betray someone's trust
- To embrace a lifestyle that violates God's plan and grieves His heart
- To call evil good and good evil.

The list could go on, but I think you get the idea. The freedom Christ gives is not freedom to do whatever we want. It is not freedom *to* sin. It is freedom *from* sin. The good news of the gospel is that if you belong to Christ by faith, you have been set free from sin (Romans 6:7). So, Paul says in Romans 6:11-14, we should live like men and women who have been set free. He says: “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

In Christ we are free *from* sin, not free *to* sin. Make sure you understand that. Our freedom in Christ is not a pretext for self-indulgence. In the words of John Stott, it is not a license “to wallow in our own selfishness.” It may be that God made pigs to wallow in the mud, but when we wallow in the mud of our selfishness, we do not fulfill God’s purpose for our lives and we do not bring Him glory.

James Montgomery Boice said it this way. He said we must not permit our freedom in Christ “to become a beachhead for the armies of indulgence to gain a foothold” in our lives.

To withstand these “armies of indulgence” requires eternal vigilance and goes against the grain of our culture. You know from your own experience that the vast majority of advertising to which we are exposed – whether print or TV or internet – is designed to get us to think of ourselves first. It is intended to influence us to indulge our personal desires and wants, and to see our wants and desires as needs. God wants us to find our satisfaction in life not in things, not in the indulgence of our selfish desires, but in Him. That is definitely different from the dominant voices in our culture.

The freedom Christ gives is not a license to indulge ourselves. It is not a pass to do whatever we want whenever we want with whomever we want. Not on your life. It is not freedom *to* sin but freedom *from* sin.

Nor is it a license to do something foolish or stupid just because it is legal. Just because something is permitted under the law doesn’t make it good or right. Paul expressed it this way in 1 Corinthians 6:12: “‘Everything is permissible for me’ – but not everything is beneficial.” Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message* goes like this: “Just because something is technically legal doesn’t mean it is spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I’d be a slave to my whims.” And I might well put myself – or others – in unnecessary danger.

Many of you know I’m a big fan of Big Ben Roethlisberger, the quarterback of the Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers. You may remember that about three years ago, in June 2006, just a few months after becoming the youngest quarterback in NFL history to win the Super Bowl, Big Ben went for a motorcycle ride in downtown Pittsburgh without a helmet – which is legal in Pennsylvania. Roethlisberger’s motorcycle collided with a minivan, totaling his bike, and Ben was thrown into the windshield of the van. He was in surgery for more than seven hours with a broken jaw, a fractured skull, several missing teeth and other injuries to his face.

A year earlier, Big Ben had been asked by an ESPN reporter why he didn’t wear a helmet when riding his motorcycle. Do you know what he said? He said: “Because you don’t have to (in Pennsylvania). It’s not the law. If it was the law, I’d definitely have one on every time I rode. But it’s not the law and I know I don’t have to. You’re just more free when you’re out there with no helmet on.”

Maybe you are more free without a helmet on, as Roethlisberger said, but you are not more safe. And you are certainly not more wise.

After the accident, Ben had a changed perspective. After being released from the hospital, he apologized to Steeler fans, his family and his team for risking his health (and life) unnecessarily. In a subsequent interview, he said he was no longer focused on taking advantage of his individual freedom. “In the past few days,” he said, “I’ve gained a new perspective on life. By the grace of God, I’m fortunate to be alive.” He also said that, if he ever rides a motorcycle again, “it will certainly be with a helmet.”

I hope so. Just because something is legal does not mean it is good. Or right. Or wise. Or pleasing to God.

The freedom Christ gives is not a license to do whatever we want, to indulge ourselves and our selfish desires, or to mistreat others for our personal advantage. Even if it is legal.

WHAT FREEDOM IS FOR

On the contrary, the freedom Christ gives is for service. It is the freedom to serve God by serving one another in His love. The Bible is clear that we are not saved *by* service. We are not saved by our good works. But we are saved *for* service. Ephesians 2:10 says that we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We have been saved and set free from our sin and guilt, from the righteous wrath of God we deserve because of our sin. We are saved by grace – and by grace alone. And we are saved for service. We are set free in Christ to serve. Salvation is not for self-indulgence. Salvation is for service. We are set free to serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13).

When we serve one another in a spirit of love, we fulfill the whole law as it applies to our relationships with others. The whole law, Paul says in verse 14, is summed up in the command to love our neighbors – one another – as ourselves. It is not wrong to love ourselves. We are not called to loath ourselves. It is not good to love yourself selfishly. It is not good to love yourself exclusively. It is not good to think you are more important than others. But it is good and right to love ourselves – and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

This command to love one another is the second part of the Great Commandment. The first and primary command is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. No commandment, as Jesus said (Mark 12:31), is greater than this. We are to love God and love each other. When we love one another, when, as Paul says in the next chapter – in Galatians 6:2, we serve one another by bearing each other’s burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ. Which is the law of love.

If you have read Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose Driven Life*, you want to go back and reread the chapters for days 29-35, which deal with the principle of being shaped for God’s service. There is a lot of good stuff there. Warren emphasizes that service – not worldly success or status – is the pathway to real significance. It is obvious from both the words He spoke and the way He related to people that Jesus measured greatness in terms of service, not

wealth or position or status. On one occasion, He told His disciples: “If you want to be great in God’s eyes, be a servant to others, like the Son of Man (Jesus Himself), who did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

If you want to live a life of significance, use your freedom to serve one another in love. As Warren says, there is no such thing as small or insignificant service.

I do think there is one point in this regard where Warren doesn’t have it quite right. In the chapter for day 33, he says that “God determines your greatness by how many people you serve, not how many people serve you.” I understand the point, but I think the emphasis on numbers (how many) is at least potentially misplaced and misleading. I think it is better to focus on *how you serve*, not *how many people you serve*.

It can be a full-time job (or more than full-time) to care for an aging parent or parents. It can be more than a full-time job to care for someone with Alzheimer’s Disease or some other form of dementia. It can be more than a full-time job to care for a husband with a brain tumor or a traumatic brain injury or both. It can be a full-time job or more to care for a spouse or a family member with a serious or potentially life-threatening health problem. If you are now or have ever been in one of these situations, you know the question of how many people you serve is not relevant. It can take all you’ve got to care for one. Or maybe two.

It is not about how many. It is about how you serve.

There are many ways and many opportunities to serve. And there are many who have needs all around us. Just in the last week, some of you have used your freedom to serve the Kolariks in love by going to visit and sit with Edna, enabling their daughter Carole, who has been their primary caregiver for the last few years, to spend more time at the hospital with George. Thank you.

Some of you seem always to be available – I know it can’t always be convenient – to provide a meal for someone going through a challenging life experience. Thank you.

Some of you give of your time and love to care for the kids in the church nursery. Not only is it a blessing to those children, it is a blessing to their parents. Thank you.

Some of you make yourselves available to provide transportation to appointments for those who cannot drive themselves. Thank you.

Some of you have gifts and a love for working outdoors with dirt and flowers and landscaping, and you give of your time and energy and expertise to benefit the church or others who need your help. Thank you.

Unlike some of us (!), some of you know how to repair cars, and you use your skills to serve others. Or you are good at home maintenance and repair, and you give of your time and expertise to aid others. Thank you.

Some of you have gone on mission trips to communities hard hit by hurricanes, or places where poverty is prevalent. Your service has made a difference. Thank you.

Some of you, quietly, maybe even anonymously, have come to the aid of friends, neighbors, family members or church members facing financial difficulties. Thank you.

And, whether you know it or not, some of you have made a difference just by being there. I read about a man who had no interest in spiritual matters, who lived next door to a Christian. They had a casual relationship. They talked over the back fence and borrowed lawn mowers, things like that. Then the unbeliever's wife was diagnosed with cancer and died three months later. Some time later he wrote:

"I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbor – afraid for me, I guess – stayed with me all night. He didn't speak. He didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said to me: 'Let's go get some breakfast.'

"I go to church now. My neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life."

Wow! That is what can happen when we use our freedom not to indulge ourselves but to serve one another in love. May it be so in us. May we make ourselves available to the Lord and find ways to serve others in His name.

That is the right way to exercise the freedom we have in Christ. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.