

'Freedom for serving one another'

Galatians 5:1,7-25

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Intro

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Freedom is a very important issue for all people. We desire to be free, we are prepared to fight to be free, and we are sometimes asked to die in order for our nations to be free.

Bertrand Russell, an English philosopher in the 20th century, gave this definition of freedom:

Freedom in general may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realization of desires.

This is certainly how many people think about freedom. Being able to do as they please. The Christian Church also speaks much about freedom, but we certainly have a different view of what true freedom entails.

We have been made free.

Our apostle, St Paul, was a great champion of freedom. It is often a theme in his letters. To the Christians in Galatia he wrote:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. [...] You, my brothers, were called to be free.' (Gal 5:1,13a)

We have been liberated from the slavery, the stranglehold of sin, and of guilt, we have been liberated from the slavery of the fear of death, and of fear for God. We have been liberated from condemnation, and from being enslaved to doing evil. We have been freed from the fear of hell. And God *donates* this great liberation to us. He offers us freedom if only we attach our life, through faith, to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We will never stop speaking of this glorious liberation. But liberation is not only *from* something but also *for* something. We were saved in order to be truly free, to live as free people. God did not create us and save us for bible study about how he did all this. He created us for free living! Yes, study of the word of God is important, but we

are called to live! To live as free people in relationship with our God, with other people, within our society.

Now if God offers us all this *for nothing*, you would think that the Christian life of freedom is easy. Well, it is not. There are many landmines. The major landmines, I believe, are our tendency to legalism, and its opposite, our tendency to live for ourselves and not for God.

St Paul uses strong language when he warns our fellow believers in Galatia to stand firm and to not burden themselves with a yoke of slavery. Stand firm, he commands. That is a term from the army. You stand on your piece of land and even when the enemy comes, you will not give up. You fight, so that no one takes your freedom away.

Interesting in the chapter we have read from St Paul, is that the threats to our freedom do *not* come from outside, from government, from bad people. It comes from the inside.

Threat to our freedom

The first threat against our Christian freedom is the threat of law and legalism.

St Paul had preached the good news of Jesus Christ in Galatia: 'believe in Jesus Christ and be saved!' But now there were people who told the new believers that they had to also be circumcised and follow the whole *shariah* of Israel in order to be saved. St Paul was very annoyed. He showed his anger about these preachers of law: 'If they must mutilate someone by circumcision, let them mutilate themselves!' (Gal 5:12)

From the viewpoint of these preachers of law, Paul's words must have sounded outrageous. Imagine describing God's instruction to Abraham and Israel about circumcision as *mutilation!* Fancy referring to the adherence to the laws of Israel as *slavery!*

Israel had been in slavery under the Pharaohs here in Egypt, and God then made them free and he then gave them their laws. How dare Paul now say that their strict adherence to these laws was like living in slavery of Egypt?

There were different reasons why Paul was so harsh. Many of these laws of Israel were really outdated and they were given for another society. This means that, taken literally, they were not useful for regulating personal life and society in another place and age. Here in Egypt we know how many people suffer under laws that are presented as divine and unchangeable. Laws of that sort stifle life. They suck the air out of people.

These Jewish preachers should have known better, because they admitted that they had received forgiveness and newness of life *separate* from those laws, by faith in Jesus Christ only. The laws had never helped them to live a perfect life for God. So why now introduce them again – to gentiles?

Also, this focus on Jewish laws was destroying the true community of the multinational Church of Jesus Christ. Freedom from the law meant liberation from the ethnic boundary markers that prohibited true Christian fellowship between Gentiles and Jews. Paul advocated a freedom that provided all Christians with the opportunity to worship God in one fellowship.

So Paul tells the believers in Galatia: ‘Do not adopt the law as your yoke. Do not become a slave to law. Any law. The salvation of Jesus Christ is made ineffective for people who accept laws as the way to please God.’

St John Chrysostom, that great Church Father from the 4th century, says in his sermon on Galatians 5:

He that is circumcised is circumcised for fear of the Law, and he who fears the Law, distrusts the power of grace, and he who distrusts can receive no benefit from that which is distrusted.

But those people who advocated an important role for the law in the life of the Christian deserve *some* defense. They could point at immorality in the churches, so they said to Paul: ‘If you want people to do what is right you must give them rules; they must know and keep the divine commandments.’

There were, it seems, people in the churches in Galatia who were drawing totally wrong conclusions from the fact that they had been set free by the Gospel through faith alone. They seemed to conclude that *no more law*, meant as much as *no more morals*.

Many in our society nowadays equate freedom with the possibility to follow all their personal feelings, all their desires; they do as they please.

Karl Marx, the German philosopher who dreamt of a communist paradise, gives a good description of the freedom that he desired. In a truly perfect society, we will be able, he dreamt:

...to do one thing today and another tomorrow; to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening and criticize after dinner, just as I please.

Man desires to be free and to be able to do what he wants without *any* constraints. We like our personal freedom to be *limitless*. Many people believe that true freedom means that you can do all you want.

Some Christians in Galatia had a similar attitude. That is why Paul tells them: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” (Gal 5:13) He even lists the areas they were indulging in:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

It is possible to be liberated by the Gospel and then to go completely astray. People can go astray by legalism, thus denying the impact of Jesus Christ and what he did for us, but it also possible to deny him by a lifestyle that dishonors him.

Legalism on the one hand and a lifestyle that indulges all of our impulses on the other hand, are both forms of slavery. They subject us to rules of law, or the dictates of how we feel. Both are destructive as they are not in line with how God created us and with how he desires us to live.

True liberty

Paul says in Galatians 5:7 that the choice of the Galatians for legalism in effect meant that they had stopped ‘obeying the truth’. Freedom needs the framework of truth. The major truth that must accompany freedom is that we were created in the image of God, of the Triune God.

God is the most Free Being imaginable. He, who lives in eternity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is totally free but he also lives eternally in community. The free life of God is marked by love and mutual submission between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The persons in the Trinity exist *from* one another, *for* one another, and *with* one another.

If God would be purely numerically one, a *monad* in eternity, then communication would not be part of his being. Such God does not eternally love and relate. Then it would also be impossible for us to relate to him. Then the only thing we are left with is law. Do as he commands, but do not relate.

We were created in the image of the Triune God. This means that we are defined by the divine nature as social beings, with a desire to be together without giving up our individuality.

As social beings we need our individual freedom, but we also need cement in our relationships, something that keeps us together as a community.

Law is not suitable for this. A legal definition of man, which focuses not on relationship but on rules cannot keep us together as a Church, or as society. Yes, we need rules, regulations, habits, agreements for how to live, but these should not get our primary attention for living in freedom to the glory of God.

But a 'let us do as we please' attitude, following our impulses with a focus on the total individual freedom of each person, and its accompanying moral relativism, these are also destructive for real freedom itself.

Both legalism and moral liberty are bad for society and bad for individuals, because both are a misrepresentation of what man truly is. They are a denial of the fact that God created us as individuals-in-community. And when people try to live in a manner that is not in harmony with their created nature, this leads to their *dehumanization*. The destruction of our societies and of ourselves as individuals.

So how do we save true Christian freedom? I believe by always thinking about it in tandem with *responsibility*. God created man in order to be free, but we can only enjoy this in as far as we also hold responsibility for others.

If we take freedom away, we move to legalism in our personal life and to dictatorship in our societies. If we take responsibility away, we move to immorality in our personal life, and to anarchy in our societies. In *either* case we lose because we are created for living in individual freedom and in community.

So St Paul helps us focus. The freedom we have been placed in by God, through being his creatures and through redemption, is in the first place for loving God with all of our heart, and mind, and soul and strength. It is for serving Jesus Christ.

We must not come under a yoke of slavery to law because we are already slaves of someone else, of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 1:10, Paul calls himself a *doulos*, that is: a servant, a slave of Christ. We belong to him, he owns us, and therefore we serve him as slaves. We cannot serve two masters, Jesus and the law.

We are able to live in real freedom by focusing on Jesus Christ. It is this relationship that makes

all the difference. True freedom can only be enjoyed in a loving relationship with the Triune God through faith in Jesus Christ.

If we are in this relationship with the Free Creator, we are truly free. Our relationship with Him means a participation in the eternal relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This amazing freedom is destroyed if we think we can regulate this relationship with law. In this relationship it is the Holy Spirit who continually draws us deeper into this relationship. And he is Gods agent to challenge us day after day, to obey God.

For in this relationship of freedom, we do not end up in 'doing as I please'. Paul says in Galatians 5:13, 'rather, serve one another in love'. Serve one another. Again the same word related to serving, servant, slavery, slave is used. Be servants of each other, and do this in love.

St Chrysostom, in his sermon on this chapter from Galatians, points to the fact that Paul makes an interesting statement here.

Seeing that they made so much of the Law, [St Paul] says, "If you wish to fulfill it, do not be circumcised, for it is fulfilled not in circumcision but in love."

Our freedom as Christians is enjoyed only if it is accompanied by commitment to God and to each other. We enjoy our freedom most, when we serve Jesus Christ and one another most. Freedom through serving each other. That is the secret of enjoying Christian freedom. Such freedom does not need a law book, and it does not lead to moral laziness. This freedom makes us enjoy God and one another with the love, peace and joy that exist in God himself.

Conclusion

As a child I learned a Christian song that summarizes this freedom very well. It was about JOY. J. O.Y. We have great joy; we enjoy our Christian freedom, if we heed the sequence of the letters of the word JOY. It is Jesus first, yourself last, and others in between. Jesus first, yourself last, and others in between.

So stand firm, do not accept legalism or moral laxity in your life. Stand firm in the joy of the freedom that God offers to you. The freedom to relate to him and one another in love.

May God bless us with this life of freedom!

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.