

June 30, 2019

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Prayer: Dear God, Please go with us into the study of your word through the apostle Paul. Grant us the wisdom to see its application for our lives as Christian disciples. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Freedom to Serve

I performed several weddings this spring. And as I always do, I gave each couple a chapter I'd copied from the book *Boundaries in Marriage*. It was written by two Christian counselors, Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend.

I love this particular chapter because it talks about how a healthy marriage can only be made from two healthy people. One person can't be broken, and looking for the other to fix him. One can't be childlike, looking for a father to take care of her.

Two can become one only when the two are healthy and whole to start with.

When we do a candle ceremony as part of the wedding, I prefer to have the bride and groom light a unity candle, but then leave their own candles burning. It signifies that they aren't giving up their individuality to enter this marriage.

Of course, a lot of couples don't go along with that and want to blow out the individual candles. They remind me of another piece of advice I give: *This is your wedding, not mine. Don't let anyone tell you what to do, including me.*

That can backfire from time to time.

But I ask them to read this chapter by Cloud and Townsend because it gives such wise advice on the idea of independence and freedom within a marriage.

I tell them that they don't have to be everything to each other. They don't have to be best friend, confidant, lover, exercise partner, bridge buddy. It's a good thing to have other friends to talk to, to walk with, to complain about your spouse to.

It's a good thing for him to go hunting with the guys.

It's a good thing for her to go on beach trips with the girls. When I see Harry Gibbs and Wayne Behrendt and Matt Smith in here alone, I know that Debbie and Gail and Katy are off on girls' weekends.

Only when each partner is a healthy individual can they come together to make a healthy marriage.

Vince and I celebrated our 39th wedding anniversary this month. He's leaving for Scotland to play golf with his friends, and my old college friends are coming for a vacation in Greenville. It works for us.

I imagine most marriages that last 39 years operate along Cloud and Townsend's trajectory, whether the couples have read the book or not.

Here's the essence of what they teach: "Freedom is a prerequisite of love. If someone controls us, love is not possible. Control results in slavery, not love. The ability for each partner to allow the other to be a free, separate person is one of the hallmarks of a solid relationship." (*Boundaries in Marriage*, p. 101)

As soon as I read those words, I knew instinctively they were true. What I didn't realize was that they were biblical.

The Scripture that Cloud and Townsend use to back up their marital advice comes right from Paul's letter to the Galatians. **"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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "** (Gal. 5: 13-14)

Isn't it amazing how much of Scripture comes back to that one line? *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Even when your neighbor lives in the same house.

Freedom and love. These are two things that must be held in tension.

This week our nation celebrates a freedom that many other nations, many other peoples, cannot conceive of. We have not always handled that freedom well, have not always held it in equal tension with love.

As leaders of the free world, we have at times been arrogant and boastful and clueless about the rest of the world.

We have confused freedom with consumerism and claimed far more than our share of the world's resources.

Even our beloved phrase *God Bless America* can smack of triumphalism. As if God blesses only us, and not his other children. Or as if God blesses us to the exclusion of his other children.

Still, as Americans, we have much to be grateful for, much to honor.

We can express gratitude for the sacrifices others have made for our freedom without taking that freedom from others.

We can be humble and profoundly thankful that we live in a free and democratic society without insisting that everyone behave like us, believe like us.

We can be proud of our American history without closing our eyes to the mistakes and cruelties we have inflicted.

And we can be clear that our patriotism and our Christianity are two distinctly different things.

But freedom – wonderful, fabulous, confusing freedom – is at the root of both.

And freedom can be a very difficult thing to handle – as Paul well knew.

Paul spent a great deal of his letter-writing time talking about the freedom that Christ brought to us. When he talked about freedom from the law – freedom from circumcision and dietary laws and all the other things that Judaism had required – he knew that the danger was swinging the pendulum too far the other way. Swinging the pendulum to libertinism.

That is, that people would misinterpret what Paul was saying to give the go-ahead to live any old way. To give the go-ahead for hedonism, free sex, doing and taking whatever they pleased.

And so in many of his letters, we find him speaking about freedom, and then very quickly linking it to love of our neighbors. Christ has freed us all right -- freed us to become “**slaves to one another.**” (Gal. 5: 13)

Please turn with me to Galatians 5, and let’s read about this great paradox.

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25. We’ll read verse one, then skip down to 13.

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

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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 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.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

We don't see it so much in this passage because he's already gotten to chapter 5. But this letter to the Galatians is Paul's angriest. He was steamed when he wrote it.

Galatia was not a city, but a region. After Paul founded churches in the area of Galatia, someone came in behind him teaching that the new Christians must be circumcised. Paul heard of it after he'd moved on, and he fired off this letter refuting that teaching.

Earlier in this letter, he calls the recipients **“foolish Galatians,”** and says he wishes those preaching circumcision **“would castrate themselves.”**

Even here, in verse 1, he tells the Galatians to “stand firm” and not to submit again to this “yoke of slavery” that is circumcision.

But in freeing them from the old rule of Jewish law, Paul understood the danger of swinging too far the other way. So he talks about this new freedom and the temptation for libertinism, hedonism. Don't use your freedom for that, he warns.

“... (D)o not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

That is the heart of the gospel, the paradox of the gospel, expressed right here in two sentences. *We are* freed through the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. We truly are.

But to follow him is *not* to exercise that freedom in a self-indulgent, self-centered, self-focused, self-absorbed way. Jesus himself said almost the same thing: **“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”** (Mark 10: 42-45)

We are free ... to serve.

That is true of friendship. That is true of marriage. That is true of citizenship.

This is where our Christianity and our nationalism can get into conflict. The United States was founded on rugged individualism and individual rights. We cherish the notion of individual effort, and we most decidedly do not celebrate servanthood.

And yet our Christian teaching tells us that is exactly what we must celebrate.

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

Despite the freedom. Despite the liberty.

This may be our hardest lesson, and yet ultimately the most liberating. Christian discipleship is loving God and loving others. Christian discipleship is serving God *through* serving others.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes chapter after chapter about freedom -- *it's all about freedom, Christ set us free from rules, Christ set us free from the law.* But here in chapter 5, he concludes: **“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.”**

Sounds counterintuitive. But you know what? That's the conclusion Cloud and Townsend come to as well. In a marriage -- a marriage marked by independence and freedom, a marriage made up of two complete and whole individuals -- these individuals will look at how that independence and freedom affect their spouse.

I am free. But if, in my freedom, I spend all the money in our bank account, does that show love for my spouse?

I am free. But if in my freedom I spend five nights a week with girlfriends, does that show love to my spouse?

I am free. But if in my freedom I complain when Vince has to work late or goes out with his friends, does that show love?

American law recognizes that freedom has limits. I am not free to attack you. You are not free to kill me.

In the same way, a marriage won't survive freedom taken to selfish extremes.

In the same way, Christian discipleship won't survive freedom taken to selfish extremes.

“For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

One of the greatest blessings I have as minister in this place is seeing the people who show up here to love their neighbors. Attorneys and ophthalmologists and chiropractors who offer their services. Retired professionals who run the receptionist desk. Artists who oversee the art room. Nurses and grant writers and business owners who show up and ask what they can do.

A woman named Brenda recently retired as a housekeeper in one of our hospitals. She comes to Triune two days a week to empty trashcans, clean the bathrooms and offices in the same neat scrubs she wore at the hospital. I am stunned by this.

She does it, I imagine, because she takes Jesus at his word.

She does it, I imagine, because she takes Paul at his word.

Brenda and our attorneys and our receptionists and our artists and all the others love us as they love themselves. And I am humbled by that love.

Finally, Paul wouldn't be Paul without giving his churches some kind of practical advice. He does this in every letter.

It's like he has presented all this difficult theological doctrine, and now he's going to get down to brass tacks. He's going to take mercy on us and say, "Do this. Don't do that." He's going to relent and give us a few guidelines.

He bluntly says that those who engage in fornication, impurity, licentiousness and a whole string of bad behaviors "**will not inherit the kingdom of God.**"

Instead, the fruits of the Spirit, the way people will know that the Holy Spirit is dwelling within us, are those traits that indicate concern for others. He tells us how love of neighbor will look in action.

It will look like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Look at how each of those things relate to our interactions with each other:

Be patient with each other.

Be kind to each other.

Be generous with each other.

Be gentle to each other.

Christ has freed us to do exactly that. In marriage, in civic life and everywhere else. Amen.