

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 5, 2009)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

A Law to End All Laws

(Galatians 5:13-15)

Study #10

Introduction: Freedom! Gotta love it...

Patriotism.

For the most part, we take patriotism for granted here in the United States. While most of us see the warts and blemishes of our nation, we still love our homeland.

I think we may appreciate what patriotism is all about a bit more if we understand that not everyone takes pride in his or her homeland...

Back in 1985 I spent two weeks in South America, teaching at the Guyana Bible College in Georgetown, Guyana.

While I was there, I had a great time and found the people delightful. But the Guyana I visited was not awash in national pride.

During the mid-80's, Guyana was a desperately poor nation - second poorest in the western hemisphere (behind Haiti). It was still reeling from the notorious Jonestown massacre.¹ It was in the "orbit" (read, "under the thumb") of the then powerful Soviet Union. There was very little patriotic feeling in Guyana.

¹ In 1978, Jim Jones led 909 people in a murder suicide after discoveries of fraud and outrageous behavior had been uncovered by US officials. The incident deeply troubled the Guyanese people for many years.

During my stay, I heard the story of what happened when the Guyana Olympic Team traveled to Los Angeles for the 1984 Olympic Games.

Once they landed, the entire team defected and sought asylum in the USA!² They didn't want to return to Guyana.

I tell that story because it is so different from the perspective of most Americans about our own nation. Frankly, the Guyanese perspective is far different from most people's thoughts about their homeland.

Most of the Russians I have met love their country. When I've stayed in Mexico or Germany or Belgium, I have found, for the most part, a deep sense of patriotism.

People love their countries for a variety of reasons, of course. But chief among the reasons most Americans love their country is because of the freedoms we enjoy that many, many people in many, many places do not enjoy.

We are free to vote. We are free to speak. We are free to assemble. We are free to read what we wish. We are free to worship as we wish.

In lots of places around the world - some of them places I have seen - people are free to do none of these things.

Freedom of any variety is precious.

It was precious enough in the eyes of our founding fathers that they risked everything to gain it. They made a pact we call the Declaration of Independence in which they pledged "[their] lives, [their] fortunes and [their] sacred honor" to win freedom.

Freedom is precious enough today that we send our sons and daughters into harm's way to gain freedom for oppressed people in other parts of the world.

² Actually, only *most* of the team defected. One athlete, a wrestler, returned to Guyana. The Guyanese I spoke with thought he was foolish for returning.

And freedom was precious enough that Jesus Christ willingly offered Himself on a Roman cross so that we could know freedom of the most critical sort - spiritual freedom before God.

Paul reminds us of the importance of freedom at the beginning of the first of three short verses that will occupy our attention this morning from Galatians, chapter 5.

Freedom: Your RE-Birthright (v. 13a)

[13] For you were called to freedom...

Summoned to Freedom

You may be able to think of times when you have called someone up to do something. Maybe it was to go to a movie, to come over for dinner, or to just hang out.

When you “call” them, there’s no arm-twisting. Your friend is not put under any pressure to say “Yes” to your call. He or she can do as they please. All you are doing is inviting.

That is NOT the sense of Paul’s word “call” here. Perhaps it would be better if we translated the word “summoned.”³

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that I recently received a traffic ticket while driving to church on New Guilbeau Road. The Sheriff’s parting gift to me was a “summons” to appear in court to pay a fine.

That summons is not just a polite invitation. I have been CALLED to appear in court, just as a student might be CALLED into the principal’s office or an employee could be CALLED into his boss’ office.

And this is the spirit of the word “called” in Galatians 5:13.

Jesus is very serious about this. He is deeply concerned that we, His people, enter a life of freedom. After all, He gave His life to bring us that freedom!

And this freedom to which we have been summoned is not a political or civil freedom. It is a spiritual freedom.

Freedom in Jesus

Set free FROM...

As we have seen in recent weeks, because of our faith in Jesus we are free FROM condemnation for sin, free FROM the threat of an eternity separated from God in Hell, free FROM ever experiencing God’s wrath.

And that is only half the story.

Set free TO...

We are also free TO fully entrust ourselves to this great God who has saved us and free TO wholeheartedly love the people God has put in our world.

As Americans, we like to say that freedom is our birthright. As Christians, freedom is our RE-birthright!

And it is crystal clear that the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians, to people who have placed their trust for eternal salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen:

[13] For you were called to freedom, BRETHREN

He calls his audience “**BRETHREN.**”

Who is it who have been set FREE? BRETHREN!

He is writing to Christian brothers and sisters.

So, positively, Christians are called to, summoned to, freedom. But as he goes on to say, negatively, there is a danger against which Christians must be warned.

³ So Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich. P. 400.

Warning Against a MISUSE of Freedom (v. 13b)

[13b]...only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh⁴

My Bible translates a Greek word in this verse “flesh.” And the word, as Paul uses it here, has a very specific meaning.

At various places in the Bible, “flesh” may mean a variety of things.

What is “the flesh”?

Flesh = the physical human body

Sometimes, “flesh” simply refers to the physical skin covering our bodies. Nothing more and nothing less than what we mean when we talk about a “flesh wound” or a “flesh and blood” relative.⁵

Flesh = human life

At other times, by the use of the word “flesh” the biblical writers want us to think of the totality of our lives. Our “fleshly” lives are the lives that we live here on earth.⁶

Flesh = sinful

But sometimes, Paul and others write “flesh” and mean “sinful.”⁷

This is not to say that flesh (skin!) is sinful. It is to say that there is a human tendency, a propensity, toward sinning.

⁴ Sometimes, the Bible uses the term “flesh” to refer to the lower nature of man. See Romans 6:19; 7:5; 8:1-9; 1 John 2:16; Gal. 3:4; 4:14; 1:16. Baker’s Dictionary of Theology says, “*flesh*’ is the dynamic principle of sinfulness.”

⁵ Galatians 1:16 - *to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood*

⁶ Galatians 2:20 - *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*

⁷ See Romans 7:5; 8:5,6,8. Galatians 4:29 - to be born after Hagar is to be born “*of the flesh.*”

This is a tendency we inherited from Adam, and that tendency manifests itself in sinful ways. Paul calls that powerful drive to sin, “*the flesh.*”

That is his meaning here.⁸

In many places, the Bible says that people who have not come to faith in Christ are “*in the flesh.*”

That doesn’t mean that people who are outside of the faith are somehow worse than Christians. Becoming a Christian is all about receiving a free gift from God, not about moral improvement. There are lots of people who are NOT Christians who are more moral than some people who are Christians!

No, to be “in the flesh” means that a person is subject to the penalty of sin (Hell) and that he or she is subject to the power of sin.

People who are “*in the flesh*” need Jesus to give them freedom over the flesh!

But Jesus has set US free.

And among those things from which we have been set free is the ruling power of the flesh. Believers in Jesus are not “*in the flesh.*”

We live in the realm of the SPIRIT and on the basis of God’s PROMISE and in the power of FAITH and GRACE!

Despite all this, Paul still warns US, *[13b]...do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh...*

Christians, living “fleshly”?

He is warning against what he considers a clear and present danger that Christians (people who have been set free from the power of the flesh) might use the freedom they have in Christ to feed the flesh.

He means that Christians might engage in sinful behavior.

⁸ The NIV Bible actually translates with “*the sinful nature*” here.

Now, you should know that there are people who teach that a TRUE Christian would never live that way. In fact, some would teach that a true Christian CAN'T live that way.

My response?

If it were not possible for a Christian to live in such a way that he or she is feeding the flesh, why is Paul warning the Christians to whom he is writing against doing exactly that?

The reality is that it is entirely possible that true-blue born-again Christians just might recognize that they are “free” (from judgment, condemnation) and use that freedom - which Christ purchased for them by His sacrificial death on the cross! - in a fleshly way. Or, as Paul puts it, “*as an opportunity for the flesh.*”

That words that my Bible renders “*opportunity*” is a fascinating word. It was used in the ancient world to describe the course that a river follows.

Water always takes the path of least resistance. It always flows downhill. It never rises to meet a challenge. Water just goes in the direction gravity points it. It's always looking for the easiest path. Water is *opportunistic*.

For a Christian to use his or her freedom for sinful ends would be to live like a lazy river, to take the path of least resistance. To live “fleshly” is to live selfishly.

It is the easiest thing in the world to live that way. There's nothing noble about it. There's nothing commendable about it. Anybody can do it. It's as easy as falling off a log.

Flowing water sees a precipitous drop up ahead and takes the opportunity to make a waterfall. And the FREE believer might see an opportunity for the flesh - sexual sin, a financial misdeed - and fall. It's easier to fall than to stand. Or that Christian might just go with the gravitational pull toward gossip or lust or lying.

You and I are not to use the freedom we have received from God to live *fleshly*.

We understand that we have not been granted freedom so that we can lead more self-centered lives.⁹

So the warning is there. But we should notice something about the warning. And that is the fact that the warning is unusual.

An Infrequent Warning

The whole book of Galatians has been one long ringing endorsement of the way of freedom! Over and over again, he has urged Christians to enjoy and to embrace their freedom.

Only here, as we near the end of the letter, does Paul warn us against excess. Only in the second half of the fifth chapter of this six chapter book does he warn believers about the danger of using their freedom sinfully.

And the weight of this emphasis tells us something.

It tells us that Paul was not wringing his hands, worried that if these Galatians somehow got the message that Jesus freed them from law, they would become unprincipled libertines. He not all that concerned that they would think, “*I'm saved. Great, now I can sin like the devil!*”

Generally, Paul had confidence that the redeemed heart of the believer would hear the message of grace, and be moved to lead a life of obedience that honors God.

Paul wasn't afraid of grace and neither should we be!

In fact, the Apostle Paul was evidently more concerned that Christians might live legalistically than he was that they would take liberties with their liberty.

The weight of the message of Galatians is aimed at Christians who might do right-looking things for the wrong reasons and thereby NOT experience the joy of life in Christ, and would lead lives with NO POWER to entice others toward Jesus.

⁹ For exactly the same thought, see [1 Peter 2:16] *Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.*

OK. We have been *summoned* to freedom by the One who set us free. We are not to use our liberty *selfishly*. We've got that down pat.

Now Paul tells us how we are to live as the people of God we truly are. And you should get ready for a somewhat shocking comment from the apostle.

Legal Use of the Law (v. 14)

[14] For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."¹⁰

Law, as the Problem

Throughout this whole letter, Paul has been telling us, "*You are free, free, free from the law!*" You are DEAD to the law.

In many places in this letter Paul has said, "*LAW is the problem!*"

From beginning to end in Galatians, law and rules-keeping and "*Thou shalt*" and "*Thou shalt not*" has been presented to us as something to flee.

And now he tells us how Christians are to live by commending to us the way of love BECAUSE that is the way to fulfill the law? Does that seem weird to you?

Law, as the Solution!

You've got to serve somebody

Well, here's the deal. Everybody serves someone or something.

Some people serve themselves. They serve their own lusts and pleasures. Others serve idols or money. You might even say that we serve the "law of self" or the "law of lust" or the "law of false gods." Everybody is subject to some "law" or other.

¹⁰ See these verses for the same thought: Romans 13:8-10; 1 John 4:7-8; John 13:34-35. "The whole Law" looks at the totality of the Law's intent, and not at the fulfillment of the Law in its constituent parts.

So what does Paul do? He lays out a law that is the end of LAW, a law to which we can submit that will bring freedom. It is the law that calls us (yes, summons us) to love.

If there is one "law" that can reliably be counted on to lead us in a God-honoring direction, it is the law of love.¹¹

Serving the law of love

If we would take action and if we would interact with others on the strength of the answer to this question: "*Is this loving?*" we would not stray far from the goal of the freedom that Jesus intends for us.

Several years ago, the Elders at Northwest thought carefully about this whole theme of love and realized that love is central to life in Christ. A brief paper was drafted that spoke to the primacy of love, aiming also to get a handle on what love is all about.¹²

I'm going to read those short paragraphs now. I think this may be helpful as you think about fulfilling the royal law of love.¹³

¹¹ It is fascinating that Paul quotes from Leviticus 19 here. It is one of the most thorough-going exhortations to a life of love in the Old Testament, reminiscent of some passages in the prophets. The extended passage in which this quote appears urges the Jews to not harvest the corners of their fields so that the poor can glean; to not lie, which defrauds another of the truth; to not oppress or rob a neighbor; to not take advantage of the disabled; to not be unjust toward the poor; and to not bear grudges. Instead, "***You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.***"

¹² These paragraphs were written by Todd Havekost and approved by the Elder Board.

¹³ I received a long list of definitions of love from a friend in Russia. The following are some of those he sent: *Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.* - Karl, age 5; *Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.* - Chrissy, age 6; *Love is what makes you smile when you're tired.* - Terri - age 4; *Love is when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing, you still want to be together and you talk more. My Mommy and Daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss.* - Emily, age 8; *Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.* - Bobby, age 7; *Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday.* - Noelle, age 7; *Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.* Tommy - age 6; *Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Brad*

“The expression in our language ‘it goes without saying’ is often used to indicate that some aspects of an item being discussed are well understood or assumed, and thus don’t need to be stated explicitly. The apostle Paul would have expected the readers of his letters in which he lists qualifications for Elders to have applied the “love standard” when seeking to recognize qualified elder candidates in a local church setting. This expectation would be based on:

- Jesus’ teaching that the two most important commandments are to love God and others (Matthew 22:37-39)
- Jesus’ teaching that the mark of a disciple is his love for other believers (John 13:34-35)
- Paul’s teaching elsewhere that exceptional eloquence, giftedness, knowledge, faith, generosity, and self-sacrifice are worthless if not motivated and energized by love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

“The essence of love is acting for the benefit of another (*“love does not seek its own”* 1 Cor. 13:5). It is possible to distinguish between: (a) pleasant interactions that may be quite rooted in self interest, and (b) interactions which are truly for the benefit of another, which may encompass a broad spectrum of behaviors, some not very ‘pleasant.’

“The presence (or absence) of love is most clearly seen in our response toward someone who wrongs us. As Jesus emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount, being nice to people who are nice to us is par for the human race. He calls us to a higher standard. *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”* (Luke 6:27-28) is Christlike love.

“It is inconceivable that Paul would have anticipated Christians placing Elders into service who were not recognized as men who loved with Jesus’ powerful love, and who were growing in that love. In considering those who would shepherd Northwest Community Church, the primacy of loving interactions (*caring, honest, engaged and others’ centered*) with the Body is crucial.”

That’s love. Acting for the benefit of another.

That kind of others-centered life focus honors God and makes it possible for us to shine as bright lights in a dark world.

And we who have been set free from the power of the flesh and have received God’s Spirit, God’s grace and God’s promise have everything we need to live this way!

And of course, we might still choose to NOT live this way.

That ugly alternative and the result of choosing a path other than love is described in graphic detail in Galatians 5:15. I call it *“Christian cannibalism.”*

Christian Cannibalism (v. 15)

The Biting and Devouring Church...

[15a] But if you bite and devour one another...

What a picture. And what would those *“biting and devouring”* actions be in a church?

Wouldn’t they be spiteful, discouraging words? Wouldn’t they be gossip? Wouldn’t it be snide remarks and disrespect and fractured relationships that never get healed?

“Biting and devouring” serves as a picture perfect opposite to the love to which we are called as we are summoned to freedom.

And if biting and backbiting and devouring and NOT loving dominates a church culture, there is a certain, sure end for that church.

...becomes the Consumed Church

[15b]...take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Like the two snakes that bit each other on the tail and swallowed each other whole, so the church that doesn’t foster freedom and that doesn’t highlight and emphasize love will consume itself on its own pettiness and selfishness.

Inevitably, when there is an abuse or a lack of freedom, there will be infighting, disharmony, backbiting, gossiping - just exactly the kinds of things that will unglue a church fellowship. And where there is no freedom, there will also be a lack of love will turn a tightly bonded Velcro fellowship into a no-stick Teflon church.

There will be no outreach, no impact, no bright light shining in the darkness.

Conclusion:

In the end, it all boils down to love.

Freedom in Jesus is given so that you will live as Jesus lived, a tower of love in the midst of hatred, strife, bitterness, and brokenness.

Today, a messy world hungry for love will sit down to a feast of that love when Christians follow the one law that sets them free: the law of love.

Jesus calls you and me (summons us!) to embrace the freedom He has won for us and to LOVE - radically, sacrificially, tender, boldly - people for whom He died.

Ready? Set? LOVE!