

<sup>5:1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

<sup>5:2</sup>Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup>Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. <sup>4</sup>You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup>For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

<sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup>If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

<sup>16</sup>Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup>Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

A small group of church members had gathered in a home for an information meeting with the pastor. As they sat around the living room trying to balance plates of cheese and crackers along with their lemonade or iced tea, the pastor asked them if they would be willing to share why they had chosen to join this particular congregation rather than one of the others in the community.

One person said she had first come to the AA meetings held in the church each Tuesday evening and later became part of the worshiping community. A father talked about the congregation's childcare program in which his daughter was enrolled. Another person had high compliments for the pastor's sermons, to which the pastor blushed appropriately.

Another woman began by saying that she had grown up in what she called a "narrow, fundamentalist church." She said, "it was a church which had a rule for everything, usually a rule against everything. We had rules against dancing, against playing cards, against mowing the grass on Sundays." In contrast, she said that in this congregation she had found an understanding of the Christian faith that was liberating, open, and warm.

The pastor was inwardly pleased at her comments. He thought to himself, "this woman should really like the text from Galatians 5 this Sunday, where Paul says, 'For freedom Christ has set us free'. She understands that Christ is the one who sets us free from the endless treadmill of 'do this', 'don't do that'. In Christ, our relationship to God has been restored, not by something we need to do but rather by something God has done in Christ. We are therefore free from the endless effort to keep our slates clean in order to 'get right with God'."

The pastor returned from this little theological daydream just in time to hear the woman say, "So the thing I like best about this congregation is that you are free to believe anything you want and your behavior is your own business and nobody else's."

The pastor quickly picked up the cheese and crackers from around his feet and apologized for dropping his plate. He assured the hostess that the lemonade would wash out of his pants just fine. The good thing about all this commotion was that it abruptly changed the topic of conversation so that the pastor didn't have to immediately respond to these words that had shocked him so. It doesn't matter what you believe or what you do? That was the message this woman had received in his sermons? He was pretty sure he hadn't said that, but it was obvious that what one says and what people hear you say are not always the same thing. Christ has set us free, but does our Christian freedom mean the freedom to think, do, and be anything we like?

There is perhaps no greater aspiration among humans than the desire for freedom and a chance to have a say in one's own government. But the very notion of freedom is conflicted and problematic. This is seen clearly in the "Brexit" vote in Great Britain on Thursday, as the citizens of Great Britain voted on whether or not to stay in the European Union. The winning side, which voted to leave, rejoiced that Great Britain now will be able to once again have the freedom to govern itself without any interference from other countries in the Union. The losing side, which had voted to stay, believed that participation in the E.U. brought more advantages than disadvantages and actually provided Great Britain with a different and more important kind of freedom.

Even in the United States, where next week we celebrate the 240<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we continue to struggle to sort out what we mean by freedom. We debate whether background checks and limits on automatic weapons infringes on our 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment right to keep and bear arms. We debate whether law enforcement officials should be allowed to check what is on our cell phones and computers without a search warrant. What is an appropriate balance between security concerns and personal freedom?

This concept of “freedom” is an elusive one. What does Paul mean by this term when he says, “For freedom, Christ has set us free”? He obviously is not talking about the same type of freedom as the justices of the Supreme Court who talk about freedom from constraint or the freedom of speech that comes when no authority can regulate what one can or cannot say.

Paul is not talking in terms of “freedom from” something. In fact, if you look closely, the freedom Paul talks about actually involves becoming servants or slaves of others.

*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. (5:13)*

Another way to frame the question of Christian freedom is this, “If we are made free by what God has done for us rather than by what we do, is there any reason to try to obey the Ten Commandments?”

Perhaps we can answer this best by looking at the most important event in the Old Testament, a “salvation event” which freed God’s people from bondage. This bondage was a literal bondage, when the people of Israel were slaves of the Egyptian pharaoh, about 1250 B.C. Under the leadership of Moses, God liberated his people, but it was a unique liberation unlike the many times in history when one nation escaped the domination of another. In gaining their freedom, Israel became the direct property of the LORD God. The book of Deuteronomy says, “The LORD your God has chosen you (the people of Israel) out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (7:6) This freedom achieved in the Exodus is, in effect, a changing of masters. Rather than serving Pharaoh, the people now serve the LORD God.

This irony is deepened when the first thing God gives his “liberated” people is the Ten Commandments. It would seem that the people of Israel had simply had a new set of rules imposed on them. But there was a major difference between Pharaoh’s law and God’s Law. Pharaoh’s law was phrased in terms of “if...then...” “If you do these things I command you to do, then I will provide you with food, and things will go well for you.”

The Ten Commandments are not phrased in “if...then...” terminology. The commandments begin with a simple statement: “I am the LORD your God.” Period. By the power of the word, God establishes a relationship. The LORD declares that he is the God of Israel and they are his people. This is the case not because of anything Israel has done, but simply because God decided that this was the way it was going to be. And so the commandments are not phrased “if...then...” – if you do this, then I will be your God. Rather, the commandments are posed in terms of “because...therefore...” – because I have chosen you to be my own possession, therefore you shall live according to these commandments.

God’s Law was originally a precious gift. It still is a precious gift. Properly understood, it is not considered to be a burden because it is a sign of God’s love and favor. But something happened over the years. Rather than serve God, people began to serve the Law. Rather than being in bondage to God, they turned to being in bondage to the Law. They did that – and we still do it – because there is comfort and security in knowing exactly what is expected of us. We are comfortable when we know, or think we know, what’s right and what’s wrong.

But God does not want us to be in bondage to the Law. God wants us to be in bondage, in service, to God. And so God liberates his people once again, this time in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ’s death and resurrection have changed the role of God’s Law in our lives.

Now, rather than simply “obeying” the law, we are expected to “fulfill” the Law. What’s the difference? Those of you who were confirmed in the Lutheran Church perhaps remember studying, even memorizing, Martin Luther’s explanations of the commandments from the *Small Catechism*. Luther divides each explanation into two parts: the first part speaks in terms of “obeying” the Law, the second part in terms of “fulfilling” the Law. For example, Luther explains the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder”, in this way:

*We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors (obey), but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs. (fulfill)*

For the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”, he writes:

*We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. (obey) Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. (fulfill)*

In each case, simply **obeying** the commandment is quite easy, while **fulfilling** the commandment is quite a challenge.

Paul has spent the first four chapters of this letter telling the Galatians that they no longer need to obey the Law. They are free from the Law because Christ has set them free. There is nothing they have to do to establish their relationship with God because God, in Christ, has already done everything. Now comes that “because...therefore” language I mentioned earlier. Paul is saying “because Christ has set you free from trying to impress God by obeying the Law, therefore you should now fulfill the Law.” He then refers to the teaching of Jesus, saying that the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Christ frees us from serving the Law so that we might properly serve God, and we serve God by fulfilling the Law of love by being slaves of one another. Luther summed up this dialectic (or paradox) in his famous statement on Christian freedom:

*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. At the same time, a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. (The Freedom of a Christian, 1520)*

Christian freedom is not a privilege or a right in the sense we generally think of freedoms: freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, etc. Christian freedom is instead a responsibility – at times an awesome responsibility. It is a responsibility in which it is not always clear what the proper course of action is. That’s because the guiding principle is not obeying a rule, but instead loving our neighbor as our self. Having our ethical decisions controlled by love and based on the freedom of Christ will often result, perhaps inevitably result, in actions that appear inconsistent and contradictory, particularly when compared with rather predictable actions dependent exclusively on the Law. The guiding principle is no longer, “What does the rule say?”, but, “What is the loving thing to do for *this* man or *this* woman with his or her needs, pains, or interests?” Paul does not set out abstract principles that produce consistency, but directs us to an actual human being with unique circumstances and has us ask, “What does love require me to do in this situation?”

For five weeks we have been posing the question, “If our relationship with God is based on what God has done for us in Christ rather than on what we do, is there any reason to try to obey the Ten Commandments?” It turns out that Paul’s answer is No and Yes. No, we don’t have to obey the Commandments if by that we think our actions will make us more acceptable to God. But, Yes, the commandments are very important in showing people who are grateful for the salvation they have received in Christ how they can demonstrate their thanks by words and actions that are pleasing to God.

We’ll look further at this “Law of Love” next week when we conclude our series on Galatians.