

Reason to Believe: Doesn't Christianity Take All the Fun Out of Life?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Galatians 5:13-18

So our topic for today is Christian freedom. Not a bad topic for fourth of July weekend. On this weekend we celebrate our country's independence, we set off fireworks, and we wear the red, white and blue. We say that we are glad to live in the land of the free. We celebrate the fact that we live in the sweet land of liberty. In our passage it's pretty clear that Paul loves of freedom too. He proclaims the church is a place of freedom in Christ and he calls us to be free: "*It is for freedom that Christ set us free! Stand firm then and do not let yourself be burdened by the yoke of slavery.*" Not slavery. Freedom! And then again in verse 13: "*You my brothers and sisters, were called to be free!*" It's a theme Paul has. 2 Corinthians 3:17- "*Now the Lord is Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!*" All this follows from the proclamation of Jesus himself in John 8:36: "*If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.*" These are strong beautiful words. Christ's church is a place of freedom, so let freedom ring. But as beautiful as these words may be, I wonder how they fit with people's impressions. Paul may say, 'for freedom Christ has set us free,' but when people think of the church, do they think of freedom? In pop culture, is the church seen as a place of freedom, or as a place of confinement and restriction? I think you will agree that whatever Paul may say in Galatians 5, the popular picture, the popular impression of the church is a place of rules and restrictions. We Christians are killjoys who take all the fun out of life. Far from promoting freedom, we restrict it with all our rules. Some examples: Do you remember Billy Joel's hit song, "Only the Good Die Young?" It was a song about a guy trying to seduce a nice Christian girl named Virginia.

Come on Virginia show me a sign. Send up a signal and I'll throw you the line. The stained-glass curtain you're hiding behind. Never let's in the sun. Darlin' only the good die young. They say there's a heaven for those who will wait. Some say it's better but I say it ain't. I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun. Darlin only the good die young.

Virginia your faith is restrictive! It never lets in the sun! Come with me and I'll show you real freedom.

Another example: the movie *Footloose*. Do you remember how the church is portrayed there? Kevin Bacon plays a teenager from Chicago who moves to a small town in Oklahoma. When he gets there he finds that the town has banned dancing and rock music. He starts dating a girl who turns out to be the preacher's daughter, the beautiful Ariel. He introduces her to dancing. Rev. Moore, the preacher, does not approve of this boy with his dancing, his rock and his roll. There is conflict. Eventually the kids change the adults' minds in the story and everyone is allowed to dance at the end, but the church is definitely not portrayed as a place of freedom. The church is a place full of stick-in-the-mud people who hate dancing and who think that rock and roll is the devil's music. The portrayal of the church in *Footloose* isn't completely negative, but it's definitely viewed as an obstacle to freedom and fun. There are lots of examples: the movie *Sing Street*. The movie *Pleasantville*. Some *Simpsons* episodes. The *Saturday Night Live* church lady. In the popular mindset, the church isn't a place of freedom, it's a place of repression.

What's going on? Why has this happened? Partly it's happened because we are talking about two very different views of freedom. On this weekend when talk of freedom and liberty fill the air, let us remember that not everyone means the same thing when they use those words. In the popular mind, freedom means the absence of all constraints. I am free when I can make my own choices. No one else tells me what to do. The government, the church and everyone else in society leaves me alone to pursue life, liberty and happiness. Freedom is absolute autonomy, absolute right to self-determination.

You don't have to be a Biblical scholar to see that this is not Paul's version of freedom. *"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Rather serve one another in love."* Paul's freedom has rules. Paul's freedom has do's and don'ts. Do not indulge the sinful nature. Do serve one another in love. Later, Paul will go on to be more specific about the do nots: hatred, discord, jealousy, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. And he will also get more specific about the do's: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That's all pretty defined. This freedom is a long way from doing whatever you please.

Mark Lilla discovered the essential difference between Christian freedom and conventional freedom. Mark Lilla is a political science professor at Columbia University in New York City. Years ago, he wrote an article for the New York Times Magazine in which he talked about his flirtations with Christianity as a teenager. He was attracted to faith until he read how Jesus told Nicodemus that 'if you want to follow me you must be born again.' He realized that would completely change his understanding of freedom. "Jesus seems to be telling Nicodemus that he must recognize his own insufficiency, that he will have to turn his back on his autonomous, seemingly happy life, and be reborn as a human being who understands his dependency on something greater. That seems like a radical challenge on to our freedom." Lilla wasn't interested in a freedom that required dependency, so he pushed Jesus away.

While modern people idealize infinite choice, I wonder if that's really what's best for us. Yes, we like choice, but we also like boundaries and limits. Yes, we like choice, but we also need habit and routine. There is a famous marketing study called The Jam Study. It was done by a psychologist named Sheena Iyengar who teaches in the business management school of Columbia University. Ms. Iyengar tested people's response to choice by displaying collections of jams at the entrance to two different stores. At one display, she put out twenty-four jams for people to sample. At the other store she put out only six jams for people to choose from. Here's what she found. More people stopped at the display with 24 jams. They stopped in awe. 'Wow! Look at all the jam!' But more people bought at the table with only 6 jams. Somehow too much choice overwhelmed and made it harder for people to commit.

This study confirms what the Bible already teaches. We are not made for infinite personal choice. We are made for boundaries, for structure. We are made for joyful service. You see it in Genesis 1 and 2. When God created human beings, He gave us freedom within boundaries. There were boundaries and rules in the Garden of Eden. Don't eat from that tree. But within those boundaries there was room for choice and creativity. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Go and build things. Go make music. You are free to play in the garden within the boundaries I have given. You have a similar picture of freedom in Psalm 1. The wicked do not live within God's boundaries. They do not follow His laws and they do whatever they want. Do you remember what they are compared to? They are like the chaff. The wind blows them around. Their way leads to destruction. What about the righteous? They are the ones whose delight is in the law of the Lord. They are rooted in rules. They are like a tree planted by streams of water

who yields its fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither. It all fits our passage: You were called to be free, but don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another in love. Freedom with roots. Freedom within boundaries. So where are we? What's our apologetic? How do we describe Christian freedom to our agnostic friends? Do we say: People out there think that freedom is doing whatever you want. Indulging the flesh. But we believe that true freedom is found by people who know and follow God's law! Learn the ten commandments and obey them. Dedicate yourself to practicing the fruit of the Spirit! Live by the law of God! Then you will be free! Is that what Paul is saying? Is that Christian freedom?

No. If you define Christian freedom the way I just did, you missed Paul's point. I doubt that Paul has ever seen Footloose, but if he did, I think Paul might have some sympathy for those dancing kids. Why do I say that? Well, how well do you know Galatians? What is Paul's main concern in the letter to the Galatians? Is he concerned with lawless libertines who throw themselves into one earthly pleasure after another? Is he concerned party animals who pay no attention to God's law? No. Not at all. Paul's opponents in this letter are the Judaizers. Those are Christians who are hyper focused on law and discipline and rules. They think that serious Christians ought to have a disciplined faith. They think that real Christians ought to obey all the laws of the Old Testament. They think real Christians should practice circumcision, keep the festivals and all the kosher laws. They aren't slackers, they think Paul is the slacker! If you want to understand Paul's version of freedom, you have to understand what Paul means when he talks about the indulging the flesh. When we hear Paul say, 'Don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh, we associate fleshy acts with lawlessness. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Don't be a party-animal.' But that's only part of what Paul means. In Galatians, indulging the flesh can also mean excessive emphasis on the law. Listen to what Paul calls an act of the flesh in Galatians 3:1-3. *"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?"* Paul looks at them with their hyper-obedience and their super strict rules and he says, "You are living by the flesh." You don't usually think of legalistic Sunday observance as a fleshy act. That's what Paul calls it here. For Paul, both the party animal life and the legalistic life are acts of the flesh.

How can that be? Because in both places you think you are in charge. In both places you are on the throne of your life. In one case, it's your party animal self that's in charge. In the other case it's your proud achieving self that's in charge. In one case you let your desires rule. In the other it's your proud and competitive will. In both cases you are in charge. In both cases your hope is in some part of yourself. For Paul, you do not find true freedom when you scrupulously obey all the commands. Paul tried that already, and in Philippians he called that life garbage. For Paul, we find true freedom when we are in Christ. For Paul, we find true freedom when we are full of the Holy Spirit. When we are in Christ. When our roots are planted in Him, when His Spirit is at work in us, He slowly starts to change us. He takes our heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. He changes our hearts until we don't have to try to be good, we just want to be good. Doing the right thing isn't a grim chore, it's a joyful privilege.

Freedom in Christ is like a flow state. Have you heard of people talking about being in a flow state? Musicians and athletes and other people talk about it. It's when you are so completely immersed in a task that you forget yourself. You just flow. The violinist is going to play a piece at the recital. Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. So hard. But she loves this piece and she really wants to play it. She practices and practices and practices. She workshops all the hard spots. She

spends days on the cadenza. On the day of the concert she stands in front of the crowd to play, and soon after she starts she loses herself in the music. Her love for the piece, her hours of practice, the joy of the moment, it all comes together. She's not even thinking about what her fingers are doing-the whole piece just flows out of her and it feels wonderful, it feels like joy, it feels like freedom. Paul is saying that's what freedom in Christ feels like. That's what liberty is! It's being mastered, filled, overwhelmed with the Spirit and the things of God. "I say walk by the Spirit...if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law!"

Here's another way to describe Christian freedom. To be free is to be in love. When you are in love with someone you are not free to do whatever you want. When you are in love you give up all kinds of choices, but you don't care because your heart is full of the person you love! Dedicating yourself to this person doesn't feel like obeying a rule, it feels wonderful! It's joy. You can't imagine living any other way! That's why, when Paul tries to describe what it feels like to be full of the Spirit, he says "The whole law is summed up by loving your neighbor as yourself." Because if you really love your neighbor, you don't have to say to yourself: I shouldn't steal from him or I shouldn't lie to him, because the idea just wouldn't enter your head. You wouldn't need to push yourself to demand justice for your neighbor because of course you would want fairness for her. Let's admit none of us are at that kind of people. We still have to work at righteousness. We are not in a holy flow state. But we are on our way there. If you are in Christ, the Spirit is in you, changing you from one degree of glory to the next. He is stripping away the junk. He is planting His righteousness. He is changing your heart. He is making you free.

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