



GALATIANS

Free to Follow | 5:13-21

It's clear that the Spirit of the Lord is at work in our country at this moment. His Spirit, overcoming acts of hate with acts of love, overcoming hostility with service, overcoming division with togetherness, overcoming destruction with shared mourning, and collective hope. As Joseph, one of Abraham's descendants, said, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive..." (Gen. 50:20).

As both, our text today and next week will affirm, such fruit is evidence of the Spirit's life in the lives of the Father's children—"the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named," as Paul reverentially declares in Ephesians 3:15. With evidence of the Spirit's working all around us, the question for you and me—a question I have been asking of myself, asking the Lord to examine in me as the One who formed me, who knows me better than I know myself, who loves me, and who desires the fullest life for me—is, "will I use my freedom as an excuse to do what I want to, or will I use my freedom in Christ to serve one another in love?"

This is the question Paul puts to the Galatians in 5:13-21. The Galatians had run well in their freedom, using their freedom to love Paul even when it was costly for them. But someone has cut in on their line, knocking them off course in the marathon of freedom. Like Peter back in chapter 2, they are walking "out of step with the truth of the gospel." They are veering off the marked path in Jesus, and so Paul is standing out in front, waving his hands, yelling at his friends to look up and see their true pacesetter who will ensure they finish the race—and run well the in-between.

Now, we have repeated to the point of annoyance the truth that we are created to be free. Fundamentally freedom is necessary for the life God has gifted us to live, for a life lived to the fullness of our potential and with a fullness of joy in relationship with Jesus and others. Freedom is necessary, but not inevitable. What we and our neighbors experience is not the life as it is meant to be in Jesus, but a lessor life—a life entangled in our own sins and the sins of our society, imprisoned by our internal disposition to seek our own good but disregard the good of others whether out of arrogance or ignorance, and suppressed by the external ramifications of culture that is always benefiting some to the detriment of others—unable in its Godless orientation to have a center that keeps us from spinning off again into selfishness (whoever "us" happens to be in any specific context).

Yet Paul has argued that in the face of the reality of living amidst evil and brokenness and sin, there is a way to live free—a way to live that actuates and animates our full humanity. That way is an uninhibited relationship with the Father through the Son, through the cross of Christ that makes a way of faith through the Spirit that gets worked out in the love of God for us and developed into maturity as we "Love our neighbors as our selves." Such was the way of life the Galatians submitted to when they cared for Paul despite the inconvenience and cultural taboos, though they seemed now to be following a different path.

Even though the cross of Christ has set us free, given us the freedom we could not attain because it is a right of rebirth not character, nor diligent deeds, nor kept practices, etc.; but the gift of a Father to an heir; we nevertheless choose to submit ourselves again and again to the yoke of slavery. And we “Christians” do so most often not in abandonment of religion—not in losing that desire to be connected with God—but by allowing religion as a set of systems, morals, codes, and laws to replace a living relationship. We abandon the relational responsibility to respond to God moment by moment with our hearts, minds, souls, and strength; through the excuse of religious purity or religious patronizing. Afraid to taint “the main thing” by walking across the Jericho road to help the injured traveler, or offering holy rhetoric that is merely empty words, “I’ll pray for that.”

Responding not by faith in love through the Spirit’s leading, but rather out of the ultimately rebellious “freedom” of doing what I want to do, not by what I am led to do by the One whom I follow step by step. Certainly, we won’t all be called to the exact same action at every turn, but what happens when we are no longer following the Spirit? Well, Paul says, if we are not walking in the Spirit we are bound, bound by selfishness, even as ones who love God but are focused on doing for God what God said he would do— that He would make us holy, maturing us through a living relationship with the Spirit in faith worked out through love. We trade faith in the promise for the limitations of the law and, in so doing, trade a free life for continuation in the binding and dividing life of the “flesh.”

Remember, Paul had used that word “flesh” before to describe the actions of Abraham and Sarah when they forced Hagar to be Abraham’s wife and bear the promised child of God, to fulfill God’s plan for themselves. All they got from their actions were division and generations of hatred and fighting. Rather than waiting in faith, continuing to move, work, and act as if God is at work, they took it upon themselves to complete what God had started and in so doing no longer living by faith on the promise, but doing what they wanted to do; using God’s promises as an excuse to live life by their own wisdom and wits. It is the “flesh,” a life lived not in a dependent relationship with God, but by our own design and desires; that Paul contrasts with life in the Spirit, of walking with God, of following the lead of God, so that he might help us recognize how we can continue to develop and strengthen our freedom.

We are going to read Galatians 5:13-21 again, this time through the Message translation. [There is a link in the chat comments to this version if you want to follow along.](#) As I read it, keep in mind the context of its message, Paul is speaking to a people who have at one time shown their love to him, who are now in word and actions opposed to his presence, who at one time were walking freely in faith that what Jesus did was enough for them to use all their histories, giftings, resources, passions, minds, hearts, souls, and strength to live full lives with God, partnering in God’s saving work. But, who have chosen to abandon the free—even if it was costly—life for separation through religious piety, enslavement through the selfishness (the selfishness of the teacher’s Paul so loathes, and their own selfish desire to control their relationship and future with God—to live life as they want it not in a dependent, joyous response to God alive with them, around them, in them). Paul desires his family and friends to see that the way to grow in freedom is through love, love that is the product of a life of lived faith, hand in hand with the Spirit of God—God with us, God sharing his life with us, God leading us to be fully and completely all he made us to be in his loving care and apart of his loving work in our daily existence.

Let’s quiet our hearts and minds, asking to listen to the Spirit as we read again Galatians 5:13-21 together,

It is absolutely clear, isn't it, that it is to the free life that you have been called? So make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do what you want to do and dissipate [your freedom]; rather use it to serve one another in love and so strengthen [your freedom]. For everything we know about developing freedom [the very purpose of "the law" in history, "the law's" fulfillment in your moment in history] is summed up in a single sentence: Love your neighbor as yourself. If you bit and ravage each other [the natural outworking of all who relate to God and others not personally through the Spirit by faith in love but religiously (or not at all)], watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other [knees on necks, piercing and tearing with words, refusing to be conscientious of another's health, dehumanizing for the sake of convenience and comfort].

My counsel is this: live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit [God's life shared with you, leading you by the yoke designed for you so that the burden of the labor of this world might be light as you walk in-step with your Creator in the limitations of your createdness]. Refuse to feed the compulsions of selfishness [the desire to live in any other way than relational dependency and responsibility with your heavenly Father]. For there is a root selfishness in us that is at odds with the free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. [Walking by the Spirit is the opposite of "going with the flow," tossed by the currents of emotion, media, or the moment; but steady, firmly grounded in the love of God for you and the love of God working through you.] Why don't you choose [instead of being imprisoned by selfishness] to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time [no religious person has avoided these outworkings of the flesh]: shallow and loveless intimacy (sex), a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage, frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness, trinket gods, magic-show religion, paranoid loneliness, cutthroat competition, all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants, a brutal temper, an impotence to love or be loved, noisy bickering, small-minded and lop-sided lifestyles, a vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival, uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions, ugly parodies of community. I could go on. [This has been the outworking of all those who lived by their own wits, even religious wits, rather than in submission to the Spirit, the freedom of faith worked out in love.]

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way [—freely submitting to a yoke of slavery, freely living selfishly—], you will find yourself quite outside God's kingdom[, unable to enjoy the fullness of your inheritance in Christ Jesus].

Brothers and sisters, faith family, if we choose to submit to a way of life that is not a living relationship with God through the Spirit—living by faith that God is here and sharing his life with us—walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, listening, obeying, knowing we are loved, knowing God is at work in love, then we will inevitably (regardless of our good intention and the best of plans to do otherwise) degrade into a way of living that contributes to the division, using, devaluing, and destroying of others (including ourselves and those we love); rather than living into the world God is remaking.

We are free to choose; Paul has been consistent in his appeal that the Galatians do not have their hands and feet tied. They, like you and I, are free to choose to remain and grow in our freedom by learning how to share life with God who is sharing life with us—to listen and respond, wait and act, love and worship. Or, they, like you and I, can choose to live some other way. As we said in the very first sermon in this series, Paul is not a fan of a plethora of choices, “whatever one sows, that also will he reap.” The way he sees it, there is a life in-step with the Spirit, bearing the produce of the kingdom in everyday ways, and there is a life in-step with everything, anything else that bears not harvests, but division.

Now here is the thing, and Paul assumes this too, that walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit into the fullness of our freedom, is not something we have to do alone. In fact, we cannot. We need others to walk alongside us as we follow Jesus, to help—even as Paul is doing in his letter—recognize the Spirit who is leading and “the flesh,” drawing us off course. Paul does not expect the Galatians to have arrived, but he is concerned that they are losing the way, and so he helps steer them back to a life of faith worked out through love.

We, too, at this moment in our faith family, need one another’s help to keep us on the course, on the journey to respond to the Spirit in faith being worked out in love. One help will come next month as our attention in our Gathered settings will be focused on Hearing God—that all-important trait of a healthy relationship called listening. You can find information and resources to help you prepare for this focus under the [“Upcoming Series”](#) tab on the App or church website.

More importantly, though, over the coming days and weeks, you will begin to hear from those among us who have been listening and responding to the Spirit by loving our neighbors over the last several years in the areas of racial and social injustice. They will be inviting you, and me, to join with them on the journey to developing and strengthening the free life through learning and loving service. So be on the lookout for their invitation.

Collectively, we are choosing to be bound by love—yoked by Jesus alongside and for one another and our neighbors in our time and place in history. But this is also a personal choice, one that does not assume that we are starting at the same place, or will be compelled in the same manner, but rather that we will be spurred on by one another to walk, be led, so that we might—as we’ll see next week—bear the fruit of the Spirit of which there are no regulations or limitations!

May we be ones who listen to the Spirit in the streets, listen to the Spirit in the voices of those in our faith family inviting us to journey with them into greater freedom, listen to the Spirit as we meditate today and this week on the words of our Scripture that proclaim our freedom in Jesus. Let us listen and follow the Spirit’s lead.

Let’s pray.

COMMUNION

Today, as we hold in our hands, the symbol of our freedom, a life given so ours might be lived with fullness and freedom; let us pray together our collective prayer, a prayer for those like us who dwell in a city in need of the love that we receive. Pray with me...

[A City-Dweller's Prayer](#)