

## **“Celebrating Freedom”**

### **Galatians 5:1, 13-18**

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Today we are celebrating freedom as we prepare to celebrate our country's two hundred twenty eight year of existence. Americans are a freedom loving people. Included in our Declaration of Independence are these words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Baptists are also a freedom loving people. Our history bears this out. According to historians, “The first Baptist church on American soil was in Providence, Rhode Island. It was founded by the ardent religious liberty advocate Roger Williams. In the seventeenth century when all other neighboring settlements became modified versions of the Church of England, Providence remained as a place where everyone would have religious freedom and complete separation of church and state.”

**I am convinced that God wants all His children to be free even though He is aware of the risks that accompany freedom and the pain He might have to suffer if man misuses his freedom.** What is the most important event that occurred in the Old Testament? We refer to it as the Exodus, the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

What did Jesus say about freedom? “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” John 8:32.

How did Paul feel about freedom? “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” Galatians 5:1. His readers would make the connection between slaves that were given a certificate that stated they had purchased their freedom and believers that had been set free from legalism by Christ.

Freedom is the cornerstone of our faith and always has been. God wants us to be free to become all that He envisioned for us when He created us. He wants us to discover our gifts and His will for the use of these gifts so that we can achieve our potential. With His help, He wants us to dream honorable dreams and pursue them. He wants us to be free to be the best people we can be, unselfish, respectful, kind, compassionate, forgiving, helpful, loyal, truthful, honest, industrious and disciplined.

**However, many struggle to embrace and enjoy freedom.** You would think the opposite would be true. Freedom is such a wonderful concept; you would assume that all people everywhere would champion it. They don't and I believe this grieves our Lord.

**What threatens our freedom? What keeps us from living as free people?** There are many things, but I mention two this morning. We do not live as free people because we do not understand God or ourselves.

**First of all, we fail to realize that there is nothing we can do or need to do to make God love us.** He loves us because we are His children. We don't have to perform certain rituals or achieve difficult tasks to gain His favor as the false teachers were telling the early believers in Galatia. None of our energy or time has to be spent appeasing God. Instead, we can use all the talents, skills, abilities and gifts He has given us achieving the potential He has placed inside of us and loving our neighbor.

I have told every church staff that I have worked with that they do not need to spend one minute of their time trying to get me to like or affirm them. I love them in Christ and will be their most vocal advocate and biggest cheerleader. Therefore, I want them to focus all their attention upon doing the job they have been called to do, being as creative and bold as they know to be. I want them to be free to use their time, talents and resources to achieve their potential and the

church's, not garner my favor. This is a distraction that would interfere with being productive, meeting others' needs and soaring to new heights; a distraction they don't need.

I think it is the same with God. He doesn't want us to be distracted, either. He doesn't want us to use our abilities to convince Him to love us, but instead to achieve our potential. He loves us, is our most vocal advocate and our biggest cheerleader. He always will be. Therefore, we need to concentrate upon seizing every opportunity to do good, to impact the world in a positive way and to fulfill our purpose for being here. And when we do this, we will discover the meaning of life and the value of freedom.

***Secondly, I said that we do not live as free people because we do not understand ourselves.*** We fail to see that we can be our own worst enemy by letting our selfish nature dictate our choices and behavior.

The prisons that most people live in are self-imposed. Even presidents are not exempt as we heard last week as former President Clinton began his book tour and publicly addressed his moral failings. People from all walks of life are being held hostage by their own selfish passions and desires that are out of control. The list includes some you would expect, like alcoholics and drug addicts. It also includes people that are addicted to possessions, money, attention, praise, leisure, sex, food, appearance and others' opinions of them. These are the people that are living in prisons without bars; dungeons they have dug for themselves. As James Michener wrote in Texas, "Men are often imprisoned by the chains of their own choosing."

Evidently the problem is not new to our generation. Listen to Paul, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love" Galatians 5:13.

Paul knew what selfishness was doing to his readers. This was why he challenged them not to put the "flesh" in command of their lives but rather the Spirit of God. We need to do the very same thing, for we know what our human nature is doing to us, too.

So, how can we live as free people and not be "burdened by a yoke of slavery?" I turn again to Paul. "So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" Galatians 5:16-18.

The key to living in freedom is found in developing and maintaining a close relationship with God. This was why Paul encouraged his readers to be led by the Spirit of God rather than their own passions. They were to trust the One that loved them to lead and empower them and so should we. The Spirit would not deceive them or let them go down to defeat in the civil war between good and evil impulses.

I challenge you today to "live by the Spirit." Open your life, all of it, to God's healing love and give Him your undying devotion. When faced with decisions discover and follow His will even when it is contrary to your own. Doing so will lead to freedom, lasting freedom under any circumstance and give you many reasons to celebrate.