

Spiritually Free

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Galatians 5:13 *You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.*

Freedom. That is an important word to many of us. But what does it mean? Various aspects of freedom apply to our lives.

For instance: We live in a free country. What does that mean? I know it means something different to each one of us. We talk a lot about freedom in the United States. We are arguably the freest nation on earth, yet for a couple hundred years now, we've complained about our freedoms being diminished or constrained.

Still, by the very nature of living in a society our actions must be controlled...it is one of the prices that we pay for living in a free society. Control, restraint, being held in check, all the opposite of freedom – are necessary under a free society.

We are not allowed to do everything we want if it infringes on the freedom of another. Even though you irritate me, I do not have the freedom to injure you in any way. Your freedom of personal safety and life eclipses my freedom for personal gain or revenge. In this country there has been, and always will be, ebb and flow as to how much personal freedom is allowed under the civil contract by which we live.

We are not financially free to do what we want with the money that we earn. Our continued choice to live in a free society, any free society, requires that we make financial sacrifices. These

sacrifices help pay for roads and other infrastructure, clean air, healthy food, public education, and a protective military and other civil services.

The discussions about these socioeconomic political controls are never ending, nor should they be. People hold strong opinions across the entire spectrum of the issues. Sometimes there are no good solutions, so the prevailing ruling philosophy makes the decisions. This is the nature of freedom in our society – to enjoy all that society has to offer, we have limited personal freedom.

Then there are other types of freedom, the type that Paul referred to in our Bible verse. He was not speaking about societal freedom. There is a difference between earthly freedom and spiritual freedom. Earthly freedom cannot be absolute; it is controlled, regulated, and limited by externally-imposed laws. Spiritual freedom, in contrast, is absolute, only confined by self-imposed limitations. This is the freedom to which Christ calls us, and we will never feel free or be free until we are spiritually free.

From what I have heard and read of others who have experienced spiritual freedom, there is a fulfillment that accompanies it; nothing more is necessary. Jesus said that he came to give us life, and have it abundantly, in its fullest, in greater measure.

I have only fleetingly experienced this sensation. This type of freedom also demands a cost: willingness, practice, discipline. But it also has its rewards: confidence, joy, peace, love, strength - all the gifts of the Kingdom of God.

God awaits our response to His love, so we can be truly filled with Spirit, and fulfilled through God's vision for us. Our own plan is so small: It's like a child playing in the bathtub with rubber duckies and plastic boats. God's vision for us is quite the opposite – it is like the vast oceans with fleets of ships.

Part of our challenge as humans is not that we are expecting too much, but that we are settling for so little. Our eyes are focused so often on earthly trappings – children playing in a tub, ignorant and blind to the oceans of joy and opportunities that God wants for us. At times, I think we feel Divinity calling to us from its eternal abundance, so we become discontent with our puddles, yet continue to cling desperately to every muddy drop.

We know intuitively, as a Child of God, that there is more, yet few of us have the courage to question the imprisoning prejudices and unproductive beliefs that we have inherited from our culture, family, and people to whom we have allowed to influence us. Our own poor choices help keep us enslaved.

True freedom requires revolution. Just as our forefathers declared independence from the tyranny of England, we spiritually can declare our freedom from the puddles of limited thinking and false beliefs that separate us from our Creator and each other.

In Galatians Paul writes, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

Paul understood the challenges regarding freedom: he was imprisoned and in chains for a portion of his life, yet he constantly struggled for spiritual freedom. Paul's example teaches us three important qualities on achieving freedom. He had nothing to hide; he had nothing to lose; he had nothing to fear.

1. Having nothing to hide. To live a life of secrets is a heavy burden. If you have ever been imposed upon to maintain a secret or keep information confidential, you understand its burden.

Guilt and shame can be the heaviest of all secrets to bear. In 1977 two young men mercilessly beat an older woman to death in her own house. For seventeen years the crime went unsolved, until one of the men, Julian Imperial, came forward and admitted to the murder in 1994.

He told the police that while he was beating the victim she cried out, "Oh Lord, I'm coming home!" Those words haunted him and a year later he handed his life over to God. Then for sixteen years he battled the guilt and shame of his act. At last, his faith demanded that he confess his actions. He was sentenced and imprisoned, yet he claims that he now carries a freedom within his soul that he had never felt before.

There is power and redemption in confession. We can confess and disclose our weakest moments and actions to God, who hears all, and become free of the guilt and shame that diminish us.

2. Paul also had nothing to lose. His well-being was not because of a house or possessions, a career or the esteem of others. He had left

all of this behind him. Janice Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose..." In a sense the song is correct. The more things we desire, own and cherish, the more we allow them to define us, and the more susceptible we are to spiritual enslavement. A gilded cage is still a cage.

There was once a twelve-year-old boy who had been given an assignment by his father to work in the yard. The boy hired his six-year-old brother to do the work for him. The older brother told the kid that his daddy had paid him a dollar to do the work, and if he would do the job, he could hold the dollar until dinner.

The little kid worked hard all afternoon and got the job done. The big brother, true to the bargain, gave him the dollar. "You can hold this until suppertime; then you have to give it back."

The father, a wealthy businessman who worked seven days a week, came home late that afternoon. He spotted his youngest son with the dollar. "Where did you get that?" he asked. The boy said, "My brother let me hold it since I did his work in the yard."

"You're holding it?"

"Yes," he said. "I have to give it back at suppertime."

"That's crazy," the dad said. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. You worked hard all afternoon just to hold your money?" The little boy looked at his dad and said, "But, Daddy, isn't that what you're doing too?"

The boy is right: everything we have materially is on loan. We must give it up; we are just holding it.

Paul had nothing to hide, and nothing to lose.

3. He also had nothing to fear. Fear is perhaps the greatest captor of all. As the little boy pointed out, how many hours, days, and years do we spend in fear, fretting about our material possessions, our looks, health, jobs, money, family members' safety and health?

In Joshua 1:9 we read: "*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*" Pro golfer Tom Lehman used this verse to see him through tough times on the golf course, but also when he had some surgery.

We are also told in II Timothy 1:7 – "*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*"

Paul was devoid of fear. He so trusted in God that his captors could not intimidate him, not even the threat of death. He writes in Philippians 1:21 - *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

He had nothing to hide, nothing to lose, nothing to fear, and was totally spiritually free.

We cannot be free until we are spiritually free. We can have all the money, all the power, all the privilege in the world and our souls can still be shackled by the chains of fear and loss. Conversely,

when we are spiritually free, there is nothing on earth that can enslave us.

We can have the constitutional right to infiltrate a funeral and spout vitriol or invade a church and shout loud antagonistic remarks, yet we will suffer at the spiritual level because, as Paul states, “...*all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

Simply because we have the right to do something doesn’t make it the right thing to do. In other words, we can be a law-abiding citizen, fulfilling all of Man’s laws, and still be a pretty pathetic individual because we are not fulfilling God’s Laws and are deaf to the Spirit’s call to true freedom.

How about us? Are we living through the freedom of love or the confinement of fear? What enslaves us? I still fight my own demons; I still wage my personal war for spiritual independence. But as my awareness of them grows and I dare to confront my inner captors, I become more able to release my fears, worries, prejudices, unproductive actions, and mistaken beliefs.

As we center ourselves in God, we are more able to allow Spirit to flow through us, healing us, and quieting our minds and hearts. We see oceans rather than puddles. Whether there are solutions or not, we make choices that support our highest good and the highest good of others. We are called to be free; let us answer the call with willingness, confidence, joy, faith, and love.

Let us pray....