

Called to freedom

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (June 26, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

On January 29th, hundreds of vehicles travelling from across the country converged on Ottawa. They were joined by other people on foot for a rally at Parliament Hill. The convoy was known as the Freedom Convoy.

What does freedom mean? To school children, it means summer holidays. To people thinking about retirement, Freedom 55! To African-Americans, it means a long struggle not complete. To some, it means a place where you can freely practice your faith. To others it means the freedom to choose what you do with your body, and with your pregnancy. To some it means the freedom to hunt and fish on ancestral lands.



I wonder, what does freedom mean to you?

Freedom gets a lot of play in our culture. Some of the rhetoric around that may be imported from south of the border, where placard waving crowds love to shout about freedom. And where litigation-happy lawyers are quick to challenge any infringement on a person's right to do whatever they please.

Freedom is an important principle for many people. But what does it mean for *us*? Our Bible passage today, from Paul's letter to the Galatians, sheds some light on this.



Freedom is an important theme in Galatians. In 5:1, Paul boldly declares: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

For Paul, the stakes are high. His Christian friends are being influenced by some unidentified teachers who promote adherence to the Jewish law. Which would be one thing if they were Jews, but Paul's friends in Galatia are Gentiles. Meaning non-Jews. They've come to know God's love and grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul resists the effort to make these Gentile believers follow Jewish traditions. Things like circumcision, kosher food, certain rituals and festivals – "None of this is necessary. Just be who you are. Live by faith. Follow Jesus. Obey the law of love. Anything beyond that is a violation of your freedom."



Freedom is a central theme throughout the scriptures. It was the defining story of the Hebrew people: Once they were slaves, enduring harsh labour under Egyptian rule. But God sent Moses to deliver them, parting the waters of the Red Sea, and leading them out of bondage into freedom in the promised land.

Freedom! For them, it meant no more mud bricks. No more beatings. Free to live and raise their families without restrictions imposed by harsh Egyptian taskmasters.



Freedom! But please note: Freedom does *not* mean freedom to do whatever you wish. Freedom for the Hebrew people meant freedom to follow God's way, freedom to observe the Torah, freedom to obey the commandments, to put God at the centre of everything.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;" writes the apostle Paul. "Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." Self-indulgence is not freedom. Or maybe we could say it's a *false* freedom. It collapses upon itself, and leads to no good end.

Freedom, according to the scriptures is living in love ... always in *relationship*, first of all with God, then also with others. That was the whole point of the Torah: the commandments were never meant to be an end in themselves, but to show us the way of life. To lead us into more loving relationships, right-relationships, or righteousness. Freedom is not self-indulgence. Freedom is not *self*-anything!



So maybe we should pause there and ask ourselves: How often, when we cry "freedom," do we mean something that focusses on *me*? My right. My benefit. My choice. My privilege.

It seems our culture has become so obsessed with *self* that it can hardly imagine a kind of freedom that is shared, a freedom that benefits *everybody*.

I went to the grocery store last week, and tried to park my car in the usual spot. Until I discovered they had posted a new sign, which said I shouldn't park there anymore, because this spot was reserved for customers who had ordered online.



And my first reaction was to think, "What do you mean I can't park here anymore!" It annoyed me. "Who are these people who order online? Why can't they just come and get their groceries like the rest of us?" (I'm not showing you a better part of myself, am I? It felt as though my freedom was being restricted – in a small way, I admit.)

Then I thought, "Wait a minute, I know people who do this. It's not because they're lazy. It's because they have busy schedules, work long hours, are balancing a ton of commitments. Maybe I should be more gracious. "It's good to think about others, you know. It's not all about me."



Our scripture uses some surprising language to explain what freedom means: Don't use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, it says. *Instead*, "through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

Aren't you surprised by these words? I am! It's not Paul's summary of the law – "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," – that's no surprise. He's just following Jesus, who said the same thing. But the language around slavery – doesn't it surprise you? "Through love," Paul says, "become *slaves* of one another." That verse snaps my head around! "Excuse me, what did you say?"

Some translations like to soften this expression. They use words like serve instead: "Serve one another humbly in love." Service is good. It's Christ-like. It follows the example of Jesus. But Paul uses the *far* more powerful language of slavery. "Be slaves to one another."

Notice this slavery has an uncommon twist: This slavery, he said, is not putting one person over another: One high, one low; one master, the other subject. It's not like that at all. According to Paul, the way of Jesus is to become *mutually* enslaved. We belong to one another. We are in service to one another.

This is not the language of rugged individualism, is it? It's the language of *community*. The language of relationship. The language of love.

I often wonder if we still know how to speak that language. "If however you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." Isn't that what is often happening? In the twitterverse, in the press, in our politics? Even in our talk with one another sometimes. Biting, devouring, consuming. Rarely serving.



Our passage goes on to describe two ways of life. Which makes it simple. Two choices. And you really do have freedom to decide. You can live by the Flesh or live by the Spirit. Two ways. It's up to you.

But be warned: "What the flesh desires is *opposed* to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh."

So let's talk about the Flesh. This term is tricky. Because we hear that word and we think about our human bodies: flesh and blood. "The works of the flesh are obvious" says Paul. And he goes on to give a long list of examples. Some are indeed connected with our bodies: Sexual impurity, drunkenness, for example. But some of them aren't: Idolatry, jealousy, anger, quarrels.

In the NT, "life according to the flesh" means life that's driven by human desires. Life that puts what *we* want first. It's me at the centre. It's only what I care about, not what might be good for others. Paul teaches that if you follow this path you will not inherit the kingdom of God.



Well of course not! God's kingdom is the polar *opposite* of self-centredness. To acknowledge the reign of God means that God is in control of our human lives. All of us, *every* part of our being. So what is the alternative?



The alternative is to live according to the Spirit. The Spirit gives us a new set of desires. The Spirit changes who we are and what we want. The Spirit points our life in a different direction.

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

And what does *that* look like? "The *fruit* of the Spirit," says Paul, is "love, joy, peace and patience." It includes things like "kindness and generosity." Also, "faithfulness and gentleness." And what else? "Self-control."



When I'm at my God-given best, I'm being led by the Spirit. And my life is full of such good fruit! It's a beautiful thing. But when I'm at my worst, well – there are times, sorry to say, when my *self*-centredness tries to re-assert itself.

Christian life, I think, is moving from one pole to the other. It's a bit of a journey. Or we could say the Christian life is like a *prayer*: "Less of me, Lord. More of you! Less of my desires, more of your kingdom reign. Less of self, more of Spirit."

This is all God's work, you know! It's the Spirit of God that transforms our living, day by day. And as we allow that to happen we bear more of that beautiful, delicious, appealing, good-for-everyone fruit of the Spirit.



Think of someone you know who exemplifies that kind of Spirit-filled life. Think of all the fruit they bear! I'm thinking of someone *I* know who is kind and gracious and thoughtful. She cares well for her family. It's a large one, and I'm sure they don't always agree. But she does not rush to judgement. She keeps that family together.

She is a blessing to each and every one of them. She remembers her grandchildren's birthdays and writes personal notes of encouragement to each of them. She delivers jars of jam to her neighbours. She serves her church willingly. She speaks well of others, and prays for them. I haven't heard her speak an unkind word.

I'm sure there are parts of her that I haven't seen. But this is what I know. The Spirit's work in her is so evident. And I pray it would become as evident in me. Maybe someday it will.



What is freedom? How do *you* understand it? According to Paul, it's not just freedom *from* certain things. It's freedom *for* things, really wonderful things! And this is where biblical freedom differs from certain ideas that circulate in our culture.

"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 *enslaved* to one another." We find our freedom in serving. We're set free to love – both God and neighbour.



Later this week we'll celebrate Canada Day. Ours is a country that's full of diversity – regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious. We all have our own ideas and ways of doing things. And sometimes it stretches us almost to the breaking point. I think it's a miracle that Canada exists at all!

The fruit of the Spirit is something we need these days – with all our divisions, people pulling in different directions, and everyone wanting to be free to do whatever they please. The life of *Christ* sets us free. Free to love and serve our neighbours. Free to set our own interests aside sometimes, for the sake of something bigger. Free to live in the reign of God.

Flesh or Spirit? Which will it be for you? You're free to choose, of course. God never forces us into the Kingdom. But today we are invited to enter more fully. To follow Jesus, to be filled with his Spirit, to love one another and bear much fruit.

"For freedom, Christ has set us free." May it be so!