



**FREE FOR WHAT?  
Galatians 5:1, 13-18**

What is it that makes a person free? That certainly is an appropriate question – as we approach the Fourth of July weekend. Honestly, what are we free to do?

Are you as smart as a fifth grader? Do you know that the average American has little idea of what we really are celebrating and commemorating this upcoming weekend? A recent Gallup Poll reveals that only one out of every four Americans knows that the Fourth of July commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Even more amazing is that they can't tell you which country we declared our independence from. They know very little of Valley Forge, Bunker Hill, or George Washington's vital and courageous leadership.

We also in the church house celebrate our freedom – our freedom in Christ. In our lesson today, St. Paul writes “Christ has set us free to live a full life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.”<sup>1</sup>

Christ has set us free. So, we ask, “What is it that makes us free?” Just because we live in a free country does not make us free. There are many people in our country who live in one form of bondage or another.

If you are a young person, you may think that becoming an adult means freedom. But most adults will tell you they are not free. They have simply exchanged one set of shackles for another. What is it that truly makes us free?

St. Paul knew what it was to be free. He lived part of his life in chains and behind prison bars, but he still knew more freedom than most of us will never know. Why? Dr. John Maxwell suggests three reasons: St. Paul had nothing to hide, nothing to lose and nothing to fear.

Think about those three elements for a few moments and you will know what true freedom is: nothing to hide, nothing to lose and nothing to fear.<sup>2</sup> Let's begin with **nothing to hide**.

It is terrible to go through life with guilt rattling around in your closet. There is no emotion that can enslave us quite like guilt. It is Satan's greatest tool to give us.

The late George Wallace, Governor of Alabama, was a white racist and segregationist for most of his life. Years later between his terms as Governor of Alabama, he was paralyzed by an assassin's bullet. Somewhere in that time he became convicted of his sin of racism – and knew he had to ask forgiveness for his actions and policies.

He felt enormous guilt because of his past actions. He was a United Methodist. He went before a number of Afro-American churches and confessed his sins – and they forgave him. Then he remembered a young black leader named John Lewis, whose head he had State Police crack open with a simple command. John Lewis rose to a position of great authority in the United States House of Representatives from the great state of Georgia. He is still in office.

One day Governor Wallace called John Lewis and asked if he would please come back to Alabama to see him. When they were together, with tears streaming down his face, Governor Wallace said, “John, I need your forgiveness. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?” John Lewis – being a devout Christian – said, “Yes, Governor, I can and do forgive you.” This is what the gospel of Christ and the cross frees us to do.

I hope this allows you to get in touch with something in your past that needs to come before the cross and the shed blood of Christ – and frees you up to become a more authentic follower of the Jesus way. Nothing to hide!

The Austrian novelist Franz Kafka tells the story of a man who waited all his life outside a door. He lovingly looked at the door and desired to enter it. He watches the doorkeeper and wonders how to get past him – and through the door. He plots and strategizes ways to get past the doorkeeper and through the door. Finally he gives up in defeat. As the man is dying he says to the doorkeeper, “Why did you keep me out?” “I didn't,” replied the doorkeeper. “As a matter of fact, I was there to open the door for you if you only asked.”

Have you asked Jesus Christ to open the doorway for you to enter in and know the joy of being forgiven – and living life in his way? Do you want to be healed? Do you want to be free? As a matter of fact – he knocks at that door today! Will you let him?

That was part of the freedom that St. Paul enjoyed. No hidden sin weighed him down. This did not mean that he had never sinned. He had sinned. In fact, he participated in one of the saddest crimes in human history – the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But that was in Paul's past and it was in the open. Remember how the small Christian community at first refused to admit him to their fellowship. One of the reasons was his complicity in Stephen's death. But once it was in the open and once he had repented of it, this sin no longer has power over him. This is one of the reasons that confession of one's sins has such liberating power – once a sin is confessed, it no longer enslaves us. It is out in the open. We never again have to worry about being discovered.

## **SECONDLY, PAUL – WITH HIS NEW FREEDOM – HAD NOTHING TO LOSE – AND EVERYTHING TO GAIN FOR CHRIST.**

St. Paul's well-being was not tied to a fancy car – a mansion – a religious position – or the applause of his peers. He had surrendered every manmade credential for the joy of knowing Jesus Christ – and doing his will and purpose.

He spent a great deal of time in prison or under house arrest. Yet, we know from his prison letters that he was freer than the well-trained Roman soldiers who guarded him.

I remember in my time, Janice Joplin, singing in her raspy voice, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." There is some truth to that. However, Paul saw this in a much more positive way than Janice. Paul's worth and purpose for life came from his relationship to Christ – and not his culture's assessment of his worth.

This past week at Annual Conference we had a young Black woman share a word of testimony. She was from our Bethune-Cookman College in Florida, one of our historic colleges created by the United Methodist Church. It brought to my memory the powerful witness of the founder of that college – Mary McCloud Bethune. I always remember her preaching "Faith is not a puny thing!" "If you are going to believe – believe like a giant." That she did. She stood up and defeated two of the most powerful evils in our society – racism and sexism. She lived on grace-ism – the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

She had a vision like Paul to do something great for the kingdom of God. She had \$2.50 and faith to establish a college for African-American people of faith. She baked and sold pies.

She saved enough to buy a piece of land – even though it was the town dump. Remember Calvary (Golgotha) was the town dump as well. Through the years, the School from humble beginnings began to grow and prosper as she did God's bidding. The hard times she faced did not make her bitter – but better

Paul gave us a legacy of a well-lived life - a life that said "No" to one way of life – in order to say "Yes" to a greater way of life. Paul knew there were things that happened in life that are beyond our control. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit – he was in control of himself. He - like Mary Bethune – didn't wait until he had perfect conditions. He had nothing to lose except his freedom to face every challenge and circumstance with the power and purpose of God. Paul – like Mary Bethune – fought the powers of racism and sexism with grace-ism. This freed them both to love God and neighbor as Jesus taught.

## **THIRDLY, HE LIVED HIS LIFE IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

Because of that – faith rather than fear motivated his work and witness.

The late Dr. Bill Bright often told the story in his ministry of a famous oil field called **Yates Pool**. The field was owned by a poor sheep rancher in Texas during the depression. The depression years ushered fear into the lives of many Americans. Would the poor farmer be able to pay all his bills – feed and care for his family – and still hold onto the ranch?

One day in the 1930's – an oil company asked permission to survey his plot of land and drill a wild-cat well on his land for a fee. The plot of land became one of the richest oil-producing fields in the history of oil drilling. He had wealth all his life and never knew or claimed it. He had a great resource and almost never used it.

The same can be said of the Christian life. We – like Paul before his Damascus Road encounter – often fail trying to live life in our own strength and power. Every born again believer has the gift of the Holy Spirit. The question is – Does the Holy Spirit have you? The Holy Spirit gives us the power to remain free. Rather than using our freedom to indulge ourselves – we use it as an opportunity to love and serve God and neighbor.

This is the power that Paul tapped into to achieve spiritual victory and freedom. The Roman Empire learned that there is not a whole lot you can do with a person who will not be intimidated. What do you do with people whose soul and spirit is so free that fear becomes inconsequential?

My mentor, Eugene Peterson, is right: “Freedom is not something that can be put in a bank vault and kept safe. It is not a privilege conferred – like an academic degree – that certifies access to privilege and honor.” It is to be put into the service of God every day.

We know what it is to be emancipated by Jesus, the greatest Liberator of all. Wouldn't you like to live as freely as St. Paul did?

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz  
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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, Galatians 5:1.

<sup>2</sup> John Maxwell via King Duncan, “**Dynamic Preaching Journal.**”