

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 CEB

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other! Two different ways of living I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit.

This coming week we'll be celebrating Independence Day, the pinnacle of American holidays. There will be parades, picnics and pool parties with hamburgers, corn-on-the-cob, potato salad and apple pie. Fireworks will remind everyone of our freedom; that we are not subject, nor subordinate to anyone.

American freedom – It's about autonomy, individuality and self-determination. Much of that is set against the ideas of law, especially concerning the deepest roots of our founding. Those who came from Europe to this land four centuries ago weren't exactly law-followers. According to them, they were fleeing persecution and enslavement by the Church of England which mandated that everyone in England had to belong to the church. They sought freedom to worship. So, they found a way out of being yoked to ruler and his whims.

Our freedom is very important to us, but it often becomes confused and muddled. Many non-Americans and even some Americans have the idea that American Freedom is basically, "we are free to do whatever we want." We say what we want, live where we want and work where we want. While there is truth there, we know that's not the case, not the whole case at least. Yes, we are free, but there are still guidelines to follow, rules which must be adhered to, and laws. Yes – we are a country full of laws. Laws that are to be followed and are part of a legal system and judiciary that interprets those laws daily.

The same confusion and muddling happens with Paul's words in his letter to the church in Galatia. In the beginning verses of Galatians that we did not read today, Paul is talking about the Jewish law of circumcision and why the members of the church are NOT to be bound by that law. From his teachings, then and now, people immediately gravitate toward the notion that he advocated the "we don't have to follow the law" kind of freedom.

So, we return to context. In Paul's time "freedom" and "slavery" were very different than they are today. They were fluid states where some people could go back and forth between slavery, then freedom and slavery bound to another person, and back to freedom again. In some cases, this movement was relatively easy, but not always. When Paul taught the church about the kind of freedom that Christ spoke of, "Paul [understood] that all human beings are free in some sense and enslaved in some sense. The question is from what or whom they are free and to what or whom are they enslaved. In Galatians, he urges freedom from the law, but that same freedom carries with it, enslavement to Christ as liberator, and also to others who belong to Christ."¹

Freedom in this sense is not about freedom from obligation, but instead considers to whom the obligation is owed.

1. The obligation in one sense is to Christ, but practically it is to each other.
2. Slaves to one another means that all of the freedom we gain from Christ is simply to be rendered to service to each other.

General Synod 32 in Milwaukee.

- Closing worship
- Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, Senior Pastor at The Riverside Church in New York City.
- Fascination with cathedrals

Church of England

- Rev. Amy's visit to St Paul's Cathedral – "the MOTHER church of the Church of England" (Charles & Di's wedding, etc.)
- 16k churches in the Church of England (25m members)
 - UCC (5000 churches/850k members)
- £8.3 billion endowment
- State church – not like here in the U.S. where we have separation of church and state. The queen is the "supreme governor" of the church and beneath her is the archbishop of Canterbury.
 - Archbishop Justin Welby

War on Wonga

- 2013

¹ Charles Cousar, Texts for Preaching, Year C, p. 407, via Sermon Pulpit podcast 330

- Wonga = Payday Loan Company
- Payday lending
 - lend money with no questions asked
 - because of such risk need to charge high rate of interest
 - “intention” is to cover you until your next payday
 - OK, but it becomes criminal, when preys on “the least of these”
 - Example: single mom of 2, works full-time, can’t pay rent & babysitter & other bills, no family to help
 - Go to WONGA out of desperation – JUST TO GET BY.
 - Needs \$400 (dollars vs. pounds) Signs papers (doesn’t really understand).
 - Payback terms: \$400 loan @ 5853% interest.
 - In 2 weeks when she gets paid: \$400 + \$1260 interest.
 - 1 year = \$23k on a \$400 loan
 - Cycle of debt & poverty that you can’t escape. Ruins your life, your children and beyond.

Welby’s Plan

- Convince church governors (THE church council) to open a credit union to compete against Wonga. Offer loans at reasonable, realistic rates. They did it.
 - Somewhat successful at first. Remember, this is a HUGE financial corporation. Wonga wasn’t the only payday lending company, either.
 - The “church loans” did put a dent in Wonga’s business.
- Then in 2015 parliament passed legislation capping interest rates ... at 1500%. Better – but how is a 1500% APR going to help anyone, especially those in the cycle of systemic poverty.
 - BUT - Wonga went into bankruptcy,² yes! That’s what Welby wanted to accomplish. Put ‘em out of business – make a statement.
 - ANOTHER BUT – What about those still “indebted” to Wonga?
 - 200k customers owing £400 million and even though Wonga was bankrupt, that didn’t wipe away those people’s debt. The money owed was called a LOAN BOOK. Like other “debt,” it would be sold off to another company who would then collect on the loans. Because of the circumstances, the debt would be sold off at a drastic discount – FIRE SALE.
 - Labour PM Frank Field had the brilliant idea that since this “war of Wonga” had been waged by the church, would it be a great idea if the Church of England purchase the loan book. They could buy it at a reduced rate and reissue the loans at reasonable rates or even do something radical like forgive the loans altogether.
 - Think about it: £8.3b endowment - £400m was owed. If they paid 50% (£200m – unlikely), it would leave them with £8.1 billion!

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/30/wonga-collapses-into-administration>

That's enough to get by, right? To make sure that St. Paul's Cathedral is still around when Prince Williams' grandchildren want to have their weddings there.

- It was at this point that Rev. Amy reminded us about that single-mother who, despite her best efforts fell behind and just couldn't pay the loan. She has been harassed by collection agencies and her wages are being garnished. After a long day she comes home and opens a letter from the Church of England that says, "We are writing to inform you that your current loan balance of £45k has been forgiven because you are a child of God and the church that bears God's name is taking action to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Be at peace."
 - Imagine her joy! How grateful must she be having that albatross lifted from her neck.
 - Think of the church! The Church of England and the church universal. The image of the institutional church struggles globally. To hear that the church did something like this would be astounding! It could change opinions, remove skepticism and inspire thousands. It would be a P.R. dream!!!
- Welby went to the church governors, those who had the power to make-it-happen. They considered the idea and said no; instead they would convene a "rescue consortium"³ for the 200,000 debtors and people like them.

From our perspective, it is so easy for us to judge and say the Church of England was wrong for not buying the loan book and EASILY relieving 200,000 people of such burden. Trust me, if you're not, I'm saying it and judging them even though I know it's wrong for me to do it. It would have been so easy for the church to step up and do what is right.

Reading Paul's words to the church in Galatia about since of the flesh:

- Moral corruption
- Selfishness
- Hate
- Competitive opposition
- Conflict

...makes me think that the Church of England chose the yoke of enslavement verses the fruits of the spirit and I wonder why.

Was it out of fear?

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/sep/14/archbishop-of-canterbury-to-lead-wonga-rescue-effort-payday-loans>

- Fear that the church endowment would have gone from 8.3b to 8.1b? Would that be a sin of slavery to money?
- Fear that there would be a run on the church, people saying “pay our bills, help us get out of debt.” Maybe. But would that be a sin of slavery to scarcity – thinking that God might not provide?
 - And would that be such a bad thing? A “run on the church” would open opportunities of communication and relationship between their church and ????? (who knows who)?

Were they afraid to experience the very freedom from the law that Paul wrote of and that they espouse? A freedom based in the fruits of love, joy, peace and faithfulness? A freedom to reject whatever financial security they might have seen in what to them would amount to a pittance of money? Fear to enslave themselves to loving God’s hurt and rejected?

That’s what’s so difficult for us when it comes to rejecting the sins of the flesh and embracing the fruits of the spirit.

[Side note: “sins of the flesh” = selfish motives”]

Rejecting sin (“not being selfish”) --- We’re not always good at it. We need help from God in doing it. Sometimes setting aside my comforts and securities for others – well, it not easy. It takes work to even think about “giving it away and loving wildly, crazily and with complete abandon,” especially to those we find challenging and frustrating.

Paul’s lessons to the Galatians reminds us about what freedom and slavery truly mean; not according to governments, rulers, judiciaries or an American ideal, but what they mean according to God.

- We remember that Jesus never said to ignore the laws. Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul and mind AND to love your neighbor as yourself ... it’s not some “get out of jail free card” that allows us to ignore morality and justice and the laws given in Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy. That’s where too many people get confused. They forget the verse that follows Jesus’ commandment, “On these two commandments hang **all the law and the prophets**” (Matthew 22:40).
- We know that “living in the spirit” frees us, not from following the law, but to embrace the law in ways that take us beyond mere adherence. Ways that we understand enslave us – to loving, God-fearing service toward all of humanity’s flourishing in the Kingdom of God.
- We know that God’s freedom does not leave us without moral guidance, but rather challenges us to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8).

- Through our challenges with understanding and applying “freedom verses slavery,” we continually mature and progress. We learn that we have the choice of wearing a yoke of sin or a yoke of freedom.
- CHOICE: selfish or selfless
 - Love is motivated by the well-being of others. “The flesh” is motivated by only my own well-being.

If we are professing faith in a God that makes all things new, let us remember that the coming of the Kingdom of God is not reliant on the circumstances around us. We do not have to be bound to the sins that Paul mentions. We do not have to live fearful that “my” freedom is slowly slipping away because “they’re” coming for it. We do not have to live being afraid, locked away in the safety of familiarity and how America “used to be great.” We do not have to live as if the fruits of the spirit are finite or exclusive.

Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and love are abundant. They belong to all of us and are to be enjoyed and shared with everyone, repeatedly.

We do not have to hold on to pain, hurt, guilt OR money, material pleasures and our own selfish wants and wishes.

God is busy bringing about a new world of freedom and slavery. There’s no question about that. The only question left is whether we want to be a part of that new world.

AMEN