

DEUTERONOMY 15:12-18

If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. For this reason I lay this command upon you today. But if he says to you, "I will not go out from you," because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave.

Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

GALATIANS 5:15-25 (NEB)

You, my friends, were called to be free men; only do not turn your freedom into license for your lower nature, but be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you go on fighting one another tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction.

I mean this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfill the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another so that what you will to do you cannot do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Anyone can see the kind of behavior that belongs to the lower nature: fornication, impurity and indecency; idolatry and sorcery; quarrels, a contentious temper, envy, fits of rage,

selfish ambitions, dissensions, party intrigues and jealousies; drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who behave in such ways will never inherit the kingdom of God.

But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the lower nature with its passions and desires. If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course.

TO, FROM OR FOR?

Deuteronomy 15:12-18
Galatians 5:15-25 (NEB)

Such confusion! So many tears in the fabric of our society. We don't know whether we are coming or going, standing on our heads, staring into an abyss or about to ascend into paradise in an air balloon. Our country is about to celebrate its 241st birthday and we are still trying to figure out who we are, what we stand for and what rules we shall live by.

It is, of course, both the privilege and the curse of a democracy to disagree, squabble and debate over what is right and what is wrong; what we can do and what we cannot do; what we are doing and what we should be doing. We do have a standard set of guidelines called the Constitution, but 20 people can read those and interpret them in 20 different ways. Ah, such is life in America—like no other place on earth.

The issue at its core is what freedom means and how we exercise that freedom. Does our freedom give us the right *to* certain things—like health care? Or does it give us protection *from* certain people or behaviors? Or does our freedom give us license *for* behaving or expressing ourselves in certain ways? Or is it all of the above?

This is a fight that is literally being engaged on college campuses regarding the freedom

of speech and self-expression. Look what happened at Berkeley, the presumed bastion of freedom for everything when Ann Coulter was invited to speak. Riots ensued because many students felt they should be protected from her opinions which would perhaps cause them to experience stressful emotions. Fragile babies! As critiqued in an opinion by USA TODAY'S editorial board: *In just the place where the clash of ideas is most valuable, students are shutting themselves off to points of view they don't agree with. At the moment when young minds are supposed to assess the strengths and weakness of arguments, they are answering challenges to their beliefs with anger and violence instead of facts and reason.*

Does the First Amendment have a red line? Is there a point at which our freedom of speech is no longer protected? Can you yell, "Fire!" in a movie theater? Words are not sticks and stones. And yet, the pen is mightier than the sword. So what about hate speech? What about words that are specifically intended to incite fist fights or terrorists acts? Certainly, there are red lines with behaviors. It has been correctly said that your right to swing your fist stops at my nose.

So no wonder we are confused! And religious issues are hardly exempt. When Trump signed a largely symbolic Executive Order defending religious liberty, the issue was again raised in a different format. Do I as a religious person have the freedom to express my beliefs by denying others rights because they act in ways I think God has forbidden? In other words, by definition, am I allowed to discriminate because of my interpretation of the Bible, the Koran or another holy book to which I ascribe? But on the other hand, if I am not on your list of acceptable people, is my freedom being negated by yours? Do I have freedom *from* your beliefs?

It is ironic, I suppose, that this country was founded by refugees from Europe who were seeking religious freedom to worship God in their own way. But the moment they arrived, everybody in the new colony found themselves forced to worship God in the manner that the strongest minded people determined was correct. So just as they had acquired freedom from

one set of ideas foisted upon them by others, they were now subject to a new set of rules they had not chosen. Where is the line for us? I guess we will have to ask the Supreme Court.

And do not think for a moment that this confusion around freedom is a new issue. The biblical writers certainly struggled with it and labored to sort it out in the context of their own social and legal milieus. You will note that beneath the surface of our passage in Deuteronomy is an assumption that while people obviously do not have equality in their stations of life, there is nevertheless a common humanity that is shared by all. And that must be honored. Life may not be fair, but treating others fairly is a spiritual mandate...*When you send a slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide for him liberally...thus giving him some of the bounty with which the Lord has blessed you...Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers...*

And in Galatians, Paul reflects on the spiritual nature of freedom. For he knows what is perfectly obvious to any rational person that freedom does not give us permission to do anything our little hearts desire. Life is not a frat party. Actions have consequences and those who profess their faith in Christ are called to a higher level of being—namely to love our neighbor as ourselves.

To have freedom does not mean we have no laws. As imperfect beings, we need laws to protect us from both others and at times ourselves. But you cannot go in the opposite direction making laws mandating good behavior. How do you require people to behave according to a prescribed standard without creating a state of oppression? Communism didn't work! As Paul remarks, *the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control. There is no law dealing with things as these...if the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course.* Loving our neighbors is voluntary, not compulsory.

Is not the root of our confusion around freedom a fear of what others might do?

As one writer noted, *Freedom is sometimes looked at as the absence of unwanted intrusion.*

We're free unless somebody comes along and takes our choices away, at peace if nobody attacks. Point well taken, for who is afraid that people are going to love their neighbors as

themselves? But once we have gotten passed the negatives we wish to avoid, then the

question becomes, how will we live when we have freedom *from* lack, pain, trouble or

troublesome people? What will we use our freedom *for* and what shall we use our freedom to *do*? Those are different questions and that is where we must make spiritual choices.

As well as being perhaps the greatest theologian to have ever lived, Paul was also a master psychologist. How well we know what he is talking about when he says: *If you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfill the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another so that what you will to do you cannot do.* Yikes! I think we can all painfully recall those moments from our past when we stood at the fork in the trail pondering a decision to take a path of action we knew full well violated every principle we proclaimed to ourselves to hold dear. And then in spite of our guardian angel whispering in our ear warning us not to go there, we went there anyway—and then paid the price later. Thank God for redemption!

Robert Sapolski, professor of biology and neurology at Stanford, has written a book entitled, “Behave”, in which he shares the many years of research he has done to study why people make decisions—which in different terms, amounts to navigating the conflict between our lower and higher natures. And he concludes that our decisions are contextual, meaning that they must be understood in the context of the situation, our personal values and the propensities toward certain actions people with our personalities are likely to take. In other words, it is complicated. But choice is never absent. Overcoming what Paul refers to as our “lower nature” is always possible.

Paul then concludes this section in Galatians by articulating the bottom line: *If the Spirit*

is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course. What I believe that means is this: going back to our lesson in Deuteronomy, in spite of how we appear to be different and do indeed exhibit an endless variety in diversity, we are all unified in the Spirit. *Remember that you were a slave too.* Perhaps you were born into wealth or privilege. Perhaps you were born into poverty or oppression. Yes, the context of every person who ever lived differs from everybody else who ever lived. But what we have in common is our humanity and that makes us more alike than anything that separates us. This is why the Law is summed up in one command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Because in so many ways, our neighbor *is* our self. And at the heart of us all is the Spirit which cannot be divided. Nobody is going to legislate love. We are free to express it as the Spirit moves us. As Nelson Mandela said, "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

Happy birthday, America. *May God thy gold refine till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!*

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