

**“Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 “Enslaved to Legalism” Rev. Janet Chapman 6/29/25**

**As we approach the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, with all its feasting, flags and fireworks, the concept of freedom weighs heavily on my mind. We citizens who take both our country and our faith seriously should be encouraged to think about the role of freedom in our society. Recently, a lot has been talked about with regards to the Constitution, what is allowed and what isn't, what is included and what isn't. The great Justice Thurgood Marshall once spoke what some considered heresy when he said the Constitution was a flawed document at its inception, because it accepted the universal reality of slavery. It asserted that blacks were only three-fifths human and women were not worthy of property ownership nor the right to vote. Therefore, it postponed what would take much blood and many years to address and ultimately resolve. Thurgood Marshall, surprisingly, was joined in this sentiment by George Wallace. When Wallace was asked what he thought was the greatest thing that could have been achieved by the framers of the Constitution, he answered he wished they had resolved the issue of slavery back in 1787, so the trauma of the Civil War and all of the difficulties afterwards could have been avoided, and all the vast energies of our Republic could have been used for other and better purposes. When Thurgood Marshall and George Wallace agree on an issue of constitutional significance, that is an issue to seriously ponder. It begs the question what other civil liberties were ignored and how do we appropriately view the virtues laid out in the Constitution with respect to the ever-increasing conscience of a nation? In other words, is it ultimately the founders of the Constitution who deserve the credit for its ingenuity or is it the people over time who helped to shape and mold it wisely and continue to do so? Marshall argued that the Constitution is a means, not an end; it is not what the framers intended but what they would allow. Thus, freedom to those pragmatic 18<sup>th</sup> century souls was as ambiguous to them as it can be for us now. Freedom is not a once-and-for-all enterprise but a constant renewal, reformation, and revolution carried out by many people over many years, under many circumstances, that is to be celebrated,**

contemplated, and revised as new understandings and revelations of justice and equity for all arise.

Whereas those framers created a document starting the American Revolution, another revolutionary 1800 years prior created a document starting a human revolution, addressing the more significant aspects of freedom in relation to God and others. The letter to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian freedom. Paul, the apostle, had started a church in Galatia, teaching them, among other things, about the freedom they were offered through a life in Christ. As the church grew, confusion rose up from the subsequent teachings of ultra-conservative Jewish Christians, known as Judaizers. They taught the Gentile Christians their faith wasn't real unless they kept certain laws, namely circumcision and other Jewish observances. Thus, the Gentile Christians had grown anxious about their social identity and the necessary moral rules for everyday living. So Paul writes to the church giving them a clear picture of life lived under the law contrasted with life lived in the Spirit. He lays out a series of polarities – slavery vs. freedom, law vs. faith in Christ, flesh vs. Spirit – to give them a path from which to choose. Life which is enslaved to the flesh, to the law, is life which is focused on the self, it is built around ourselves first. Sort of like Lucy in the comic strip Peanuts who is listening to Linus read about astronomy. He says, “It says here that the world revolves around the sun once a year.” “Huh, are you sure?” Lucy responds, “I thought it revolved around me.” In contrast, Paul teaches that true serenity is found in serving others and in living by the fruit of the Spirit. By doing so, he is establishing an important distinction between legalism versus grace which still plays out in churches of today.

A story is told of a church potluck, maybe much like the one we are having later, which held a bowl of freshly picked peaches with a sign that said, “Peaches– take one per person. Remember, God is watching.” A little further down the line next to the cookies, someone had scribbled with a crayon, “Cookies – take all you want. God is watching the peaches.” Legalism leads to destructive behaviors, a form of slavery, which is unhealthy and self-indulgent. Paul counters the teachings of the Judaizers by

**boldly proclaiming that “for freedom Christ has set us free.” We are set free from that endless treadmill of “do this” and “don’t do that.” In Christ, our relationship to God has been restored, not by something we need to do, but rather by something God has done in Christ. When we fully grasp this fact, then we can finally begin to enjoy the freedom to truly live. Scot McKnight tells a story of visiting family in Venice, Florida, the winter home of a well-known circus. Walking around the circus grounds, they were intrigued by the elephant training. Each elephant was tied by a heavy iron ankle bracelet that was chained to a post in the ground. They stood moving their leg back and forth trying to free themselves from the chain, all except one who wasn’t chained to anything. If it wanted to, it could simply walk away. As they watched the trainer, Scot asked why the one elephant kept moving its leg when it wasn’t tied to anything and what kept it from just wandering off?” The trainer said, “Because the elephant thinks its leg is chained to the post. It doesn’t realize that it is free.”**

**Paul believed that as long as we were focused on the law and chained to the desires of the flesh, we were not free. It is one of the dangers of legalism. There has been a lot of misunderstanding about legalism over the generations – some believe it is when humans try to justify themselves before God on the basis of works, while others say it is when Mosaic law distinguishes Jews from Gentiles. Yet I tend to lean towards McKnight’s interpretation as he writes that legalism is any practice or belief that is added to the gospel that compromises the reality of Christ as our Savior being enough for our salvation. It questions both that Christ is enough and that we can trust in the Holy Spirit’s leading for moral living, because God makes it so. Secondly, legalism demands that you or I adopt a group’s special markers or identity in order to be fully acceptable to God. At its deepest level, legalism is the accusation against you or me that we are not accepted by God in Christ and have the Spirit living within us. This is what Paul is challenging in the book of Galatians. He goes so far as to indicate that legalism, a life lived in slavery, leads to vices such as fornication, impurity, strife, jealousy, anger, envy, and all those other things.**

However, a life lived in freedom is characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. So a quick pop quiz. You heard the list earlier- how many fruit of the Spirit are there? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, 9? Actually, it's a trick question. Paul's use of the singular rather than the plural verb here indicates there is only one fruit of the Spirit- love. He names love at the beginning and then lists the characteristics of love when it is made real in our lives. While living in the flesh results in a plurality of behaviors, the Holy Spirit generates a singular fruit, against which there is no law. Love is not one virtue or ideal among others, but the mainspring of all the other activities or behaviors. Christian freedom is not an unbridled "free-for-all" but is manifested in a complete dedication to the welfare of one's neighbors, in other words, love your neighbor as yourself (sound familiar?). The problem has been we confuse freedom with "license." License means you don't care about anybody else, so you have no qualms about doing whatever you want, regardless of its effect on others or on your relationship with God. When communities fail to accentuate the primacy of love, then a competitive and destructive impulse is unleashed, which consumes individuals and erodes communal bonds. But when giving oneself away in love to God and one another is the guiding factor, we discover what it means to be truly free. Dr. Fred Craddock taught a course on Galatians and at its completion, a student said, "You know, I think you can just sum up the whole book in one point." Craddock said, "What's that?" He said, "If you hold God up, God won't let you down." He responded, "Well... um... thank you for that, but that's not going to be on the test." What might be on the test is what path we choose as citizens of a nation that is constantly evolving in its understanding of freedom, justice, care of the poor and vulnerable, and equity for all. The fruit of the Holy Spirit, like the virtues of our Constitution, do not describe us or things as they are. In the midst of a crisis in civilization, they describe an end, a purpose, that has been won for us by the grace of God and the blood of those before us. Paul says, "You were called to freedom; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." Could there be a more perfect goal for the evolution and celebration of a nation? I don't think so!