### “Freedom and Commitment” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 29, 2025

**Galatians 5:1, 13–15, 22–23**

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . 13 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. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. . .

22  The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

**Luke 9:57–60**

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60 And Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

One of the most interesting aspects of preaching is to find a common ground, or a kind of relationship, between two very different passages of Scripture. There is some tension between these two passages. Paul emphasizes the freedom that Christ brings. He even comes “*for*” freedom (Gal 5:1). Christians should not follow blindly or enslave themselves to others, but should have healthy, loving relationships. In fact, love is the fulfillment of the whole law. Don’t be biting and devouring each other within the congregation.

The Spirit brings “love, joy, peace,” the others we just quoted, and finally “self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). Having self-control is a sign of maturing, of someone who has come to terms with themselves and achieved some mastery. Someone who has self-control and who is kind and generous, can be trusted with freedom. This is an important principle, that freedom doesn’t mean anarchy, because this kind of freedom comes with self-control and consideration for self and others.

But this passage finds a kind of contrast to the message Jesus gives when he encounters people who want to follow him. I think Jesus is talking about what is required for those who would become full-time followers, either apostles or evangelists. He trained a group of 70 evangelists who had to leave their homes just like the apostles and become preachers, following him. That’s why there’s a certain severity to what he says.

Full-time evangelists can’t linger and be concerned with family duties. They have to be willing to leave their family behind, at least for the time that they will be full-time proclaimers of the kingdom. They have to be used to having no “hole” or “nest,” nowhere consistently to lay their head. They travelled throughout Galilee, Samaria, and Judaea, preaching. Jesus needs those people to make a wholehearted commitment, and thus the dire contrast he makes between being a preacher and staying behind to look to family duties.

Even those of us who are *not* full-time preachers such as these have to make a commitment to put God first, to love God with all one’s heart and mind. Can this be unified with what Paul says about freedom in the Galatians passage? I think so, because Paul’s freedom is not without commitment. We already saw that it comes with self-control and a high degree of consideration for others. It also comes with a selfless commitment to, and abiding faith in, God.

That is hinted at in Paul’s list, where he mentions “faithfulness” (5:22). That means loyalty to something higher than oneself. Also, the love command means not placing oneself first. Elsewhere Paul will speak of the commitment that Christians must make. In this passage he is emphasizing the freedom that Christians have, but it is freedom with love and with self-control. It is a mature freedom that includes personal and communal responsibilities. The commitment that Jesus required from his evangelists involved self-control, too, because they had to not be crushed when their message was rejected by some of the people to whom they would preach. They had to be focused on their mission and not on the results. Sometimes they had to be satisfied with only planting seeds for a future audience.

Perhaps Jesus was aiming at encouraging a spiritually well-balanced character, people with the joyous and lighthearted creativity of free artists, but also with plenty of backbone and the ability to withstand rejection and even persecution. They needed maturity, along with their freedom, and it is maturity that made the freedom possible. Maturity provided the soil that fostered freedom. We are to unite the freedom of artists with the commitment of soldiers. The group U2 sings, “I’m not afraid to die. I’m not afraid to live” (“Kite”).

Life can be complicated: we need both kinds of fearlessness. But the method is not to be stern and hard-hearted. There is joy and peace in the kingdom. There is humor, good-hearted generosity, and tender gentleness, but also strong faithfulness and mature self-control. Following Jesus results in a well-rounded character capable of growing and learning. Those conformists who only follow the crowd will find that their emotional depth is stunted, their reactions are not honest and heartfelt, but cautious and fear-based. A Christian is meant to have inward freedom, and to have honest reactions to life and community. But this does not mean isolation. A follower of Christ will be in relationship with others. A Christian should have spiritual communion with other Christians. The benefits are not only magnified, but exponentially so.

Jesus wants commitment from us, but he also grants freedom to us. He doesn’t want us all to be carbon copies or to utter the same slogans all the time. We do have free will upon which to act. We can go ahead and be creative thinkers and fearless discerners. As Ephesians says, we will come “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children” (Eph 4:13–14). We are to become more Christ-like in our character, while yet being the unique persons that we are. Jesus and God love you as you are right now, and will love you for the person you become.

A Christian’s behavior is not carved in stone. The unpredictability of life will throw us into situations where we don’t have a pre-determined course of action. Life is too complex to have a list of pre-determined answers to every problem. We have to assess each situation in the light of our permanent values, and choose the best course of action we can imagine. This is where freedom and loyalty work together. We remain loyal to our values, but we need the creative freedom to be able to interpret the strange new situation.

Psychologist Michelle Hintz writes “Freedom isn’t about having every door open—it’s about choosing the doors that align with your values and walking through them with intention.” She says, “As I often tell my clients, *‘True freedom isn’t the absence of responsibility; it’s the ability to align your actions with your values. . . Freedom without intention is just an illusion*’” (cadenzacenter.com/true-freedom-the-courage-to-commit-and-the-illusion-of-choice/).

I have a story about intention. The mathematician, John Nash, who was the subject of the movie *A Beautiful Mind* suffered from schizophrenia. His wife gave up her scientific career to take care of him and their son. At one point he asked her, “how do you do all this work, and handle the difficulties?” She said “whatever I do, I add meaning to it. I’m doing it for you and Johnny.”

Real freedom is the freedom of a pilgrim, not of a wanderer. A pilgrim knows towards what destination he is headed. A wanderer is aimless ([www.omnesmag.com/en/](http://www.omnesmag.com/en/) news/freedom- and-compromise-key-keys-of-x-symposium-saint-josemaria/). We know that our path is discipleship accompanied by mighty transformation, seeking to approach the “full stature of Christ.” With Jesus we are guided wherever we go. Surely we are on the right path.