

***FREEDOM LIVING***  
**Psalm 77; Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

As we approach Independence Day next week, I find this passage from Paul's *Letter to the Church at Galatia* most interesting. Freedom! Freedom is an idea that takes on different meanings as this holiday approaches. However, the idea of freedom does not originate in the secular world. Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God.

In the beginning, when God created humankind, God could have made us puppet-like, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. What kind of relationship would that be? God created us, women and men, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God.

Three-thousand years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Hebrew people suffered under bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" When Pharaoh refused, God delivered.

A thousand years later, the people were again oppressed; both by the tyranny of the Roman Empire and by the powers and principalities of the world, and God sent a man named Jesus. He announced in his inaugural sermon that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free."

This same liberating Jesus would later say to his closest followers, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Indeed, this entire letter written by Paul to the Galatians churches is one long, angry, passionate, and life-giving argument regarding the expansiveness of God's saving work in Jesus and the resulting freedom of those who find themselves in Christ. You see, Christianity is not a constricting undergarment. Instead, it is an invitation to freedom from the pull of corrupted character.

In the *Grace Awakening*, Charles Swindoll recalls the sense of freedom he had when as a teenage he first received his driver's license. His dad rewarded him. "Tell you what, son...you can have the car for two hours, all on your own." Only four words, but how wonderful, "All on your own!" Swindoll shares. I thanked him. My pulse rate must have shot up to 180 as I backed out of the driveway and roared off. While cruising along "all on my own," I began to think wild stuff - like, this car can probably do 199 miles an hour. I could go to Galveston and back twice in two hours if I averaged 100 miles an hour. I can fly down the Gulf Freeway and even run a few lights. After all, nobody's here to say, "Don't." We're talking dangerous, crazy thoughts! But you know what? I didn't do any of them. I don't believe I drove over the speed limit. In fact, I distinctly remember turning into the driveway early...I had my dad's car all to myself with a full

tank of gas in a context of total privacy and freedom, but I didn't go crazy. Why? My relationship with my dad and my granddad was so strong that I couldn't, even though I had a license and nobody was in the car to restrain me. Over a period of time, there had developed a sense of trust, a deep love relationship that held me in restraint."

In these verses from Galatians, Paul is saying unequivocally that freedom is for love. For Paul the harsh debates and infighting among the young Christians in Galatia were outward and visible signs of an ongoing enslavement. The Galatians were allowing debates over circumcision to be given precedence over the law of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Focus on the flesh in the form of circumcision prevented appropriate "religion" – which means "to bind together." The task was to turn attention to the power of the Spirit to direct their decisions, their relationships, and their core identity as human beings and as children of God. Paul appeals to the risen Christ as the basis for understanding the meanings and the relationships of servant hood, freedom, love and the Spirit.

One theologian has said that Paul is reminding us that Christ's perfect freedom engages us in a call. That call carries obligation to neighbor as well as to God, to invest ourselves in the community of faith, to put up with the sandpaper of fellow congregants' wearisome ways against the rough edges of our own un-holiness. That call impels us to prepare our hearts for worship, so that we must be fed or know sharp hunger; to exist in community with such openness and generosity that our neighbor's well-being is part and parcel of our own well-being. Our freedom in Christ is not evidenced by results but by our character, by the fruit we bear, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such.

When I was about eleven years old, I did not like my name and asked my mom if I could go to court to have my name changed. A few days later I was visiting at my grandparents home when my great-grandmother asked me to come have a seat in the chair beside her. "Come here, child, and sit a spell" as she patted the seat of the woven-bottom chair. I did as instructed and she continued, "Your mammy tells me that you do not like your name. Well, I tell you, the happiest day of my life was when your mammy told me that she gave my name to you. I have carried that name, never bringing shame or disgrace to that name and then I passed it on to you. I was so happy that you would carry that name on after I am gone, and carry it with pride, never bringing shame or disgrace to that name that I passed on to you."

I could hardly believe my ears! "What is your name, Grandma?" "Why, my name is Jennie, same as yours."

Suddenly, that name that had once been disliked was an honor. And, I loved that name because I loved my great-grandmother Jennie. A few years' later in high school and facing temptations of various kinds, I was tempted, but heard the voice of my beloved great-grandmother saying, "And I passed it on to you, and you will carry it and never bring shame or disgrace."