For Freedom! Memory Verse: Galatians 5:13

July 2, 2023 Scripture Reading: Mark 12:28-34

TITLE SLIDE

 As you all know, in two days from now, we will be gathering together with friends and family to celebrate a national holiday, Independence Day! Most likely there will be grilled meat, some sort of pasta or potato salad and after all that, we surround ourselves with strangers in the dark of night in order to look upon the explosion of rocket’s red glare. To the uninitiated, it may seem like a strange practice.

 It’s a national holiday, it’s tradition, it is how we Americans celebrate freedom. That’s what we are going to talk about today: freedom. There are many ways to conceive of this idea of freedom. For our forefathers, it meant living out from under the power and authority of the monarchy. It meant no taxation without representation. It meant devising a form of government that included a figure of authority and yet not a ruler, a form of government that included the voice of the people but yet avoided mob rule, a form of government that represented and honored the rights that were believed to be bestowed by God himself, and yet, did not function with some sort of state religion. These types of ideas had not yet been tried, but this newly forming country was the laboratory in which the great American Experiment might be conducted. Whatever else might be said about the founders of this country, they did set in motion a nation like no other. No other nation in history knows the fast growth of prosperity, raising the standards of what is thought of as personal freedom and living peacefully with all kinds of cultures and religions from around the world. Some refer to this phenomenon as the “melting pot”. Today, thousand upon thousands from the world over seek to live here.

 Many would say that as a country, we have lost much of that ethos; that the American Experiment is now over; that the populace would rather be safe than be free. I don’t know if that rings true for you.

 We all know that freedom is dangerous. If I, as a parent allow my child to roam free throughout town, who knows what could happen to them. There are so many dangers at play. I know that safety takes a higher priority for children than does freedom. I will say something like, “You can play outside but stay in the yard”. Children experience limited freedom. But as kids grow older, as they learn more about the world, we allow for greater freedom, and with this freedom also comes a greater potential for danger because now, more and more, that child is the one making decisions. Freedom includes the freedom to make mistakes.

 So we celebrate freedom from the rule of a British king. We celebrate freedom from the oversight of parents. But we have yet to talk about the most important kind of freedom, and that is freedom from sin. And it is the most important type of freedom because sin is our greatest problem…by far, no contest. Even when we take into account all the news headlines and tragedies – even all those problems pale in comparison to sin, to our offense against a holy God. And when we talk about sin, we need to talk about my sin, my personal sin. It’s much more fun to talk about someone else’s sin or society’s sins, but we put the cart before the horse if we do not look in the mirror and address our own failings before a holy God.

SLIDE 2: Galatians 5

 Turn with me to the book of Galatians. Today, we are going to skim this letter, and truthfully, this is a letter that should not be skimmed. I fully admit that we will not do justice to Galatians today, so please spend some time this week to read through it. It is well worth your time. But for now, we will summarize. Now this whole letter really is about how to become free from sin, we call that being made righteous, or another fancy word for that would be “justified.” And becoming justified, that is being made right with God, is the most important thing for any human to achieve because if we are not made right with God, then we remain dead in our sin. It’s a problem. We need to be set free from our sin.

**SLIDE 3: We need to be set free from our sin.**

 So Paul went through this city of Galatia preaching the gospel, telling everyone about Jesus’ death and resurrection. He starts up some churches in the area and people start coming to faith, they believe in what Jesus did on their behalf. They receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, they find relief in being set free from their sin and the joy of being made right with God. So things are moving along and everything is on the right track, but, after Paul leaves, eventually some folks start coming around touting rules and regulations from the Old Testament Law, citing Moses as their source and questioning Paul’s knowledge on the matter. The Galatians then become a bit confused. They begin to question the reality of their freedom. Maybe they have not been set free. Maybe they need to follow the old Laws in order to be made right with God. Simple.

 We can’t really blame them. It actually makes sense. As humans, we understand cause and effect. We know that if we want something to happen, say freedom from a tyrannical king, we need to take a risk and do something drastic. We would have to risk safety and take intentional steps to pull out from under the power of someone else. We know that if we want a certain result, we have to do something to make that happen. And so the Galatians understand this same dynamic. If we want to be free from the power of sin, it makes good sense that we have to do something in order to achieve that result. So, sure, we follow all these laws and rules, then the effect will be being put right with God.

 But Paul is adamant that this is not the way to freedom, and the letter we have before us is his response to all this confusion. And here is his thesis in chapter 2 verse 16 READ.

**SLIDE 4: Galatians 2:16 However, we know that a person isn’t made righteous by the works of the Law but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We ourselves believed in Christ Jesus so that we could be made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the Law—because no one will be made righteous by the works of the Law.**

You are made righteous through Christ not the Law. In fact, he goes on to say in verses 19-20 that he actually has died to the Law so that he could live for God. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God’s Son who loved me and gave himself for me…if we become righteous through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

 So Paul sort of pits these two means of freedom against each other…the Law on one side, and Christ on the other. He then goes on to call the Galatians irrational. He asks them, “How did you get the Holy Spirit? Was it through the Law or through faith?” Why would you turn from faith in Christ in order to go back to relying on your own human effort? In other words, why put aside the free gift of grace, just to take up a list of rules and duties that you won’t be able to follow anyway?

 Remember I said earlier, we intrinsically understand cause and effect, give and take. We have harder time understanding gifts. First of all, receiving gifts revolves around some sort of occasion. There is always a reason for the gift, Christmas or birthday. In that sense then, gifts are somehow prompted. Secondly, when we receive a gift, there is often a sense of obligation that comes with it. For example, if my sister purchases some opulent gift for one of my kids, then I might feel the need to reciprocate and do likewise when it comes time to give a gift to one of her kids. I don’t want to feel indebted to her or outdone by her. I don’t want to feel like I owe her. We have all experienced the invisible and unnamed strings that might be attached to a gift, even if we are the ones who put those strings there. But, for Paul, this freedom is truly a gift. It is not prompted by some occasion. It is not something we have to work for or earn, it is something we merely accept in faith.

 He turns to Abraham as his main example because for the Jewish people, Abraham was the claim to fame. If you were born into his line, you were a chosen child of God…certainly a free gift! A Jewish person did nothing to attain this chosen status. They were merely born. And because of their status, they were taught to carefully live under the Law that eventually came through Moses. Paul’s point then is, Father Abraham was righteous…everyone agrees, but he did not have the Law at the time, so how was he made righteous? Through his faith! This is why Paul considers the Galatians to be so irrational. Abraham then, is not really the father of an ancestral line, he is more truly the father of all those who also believe as he did. He is the father of all those who share the same faith that he had. In chapter 3, verse 8 Paul highlights the fact that all the Gentiles were to be blessed through Abraham. That was the plan from the start. He concludes then that if faith brings righteousness, then the Law brings death and condemnation. It can only point out our sin…it cannot save.

 In verse 19 Paul than answers a question we all might be thinking at this point: if the Law is so useless, why did God give it in the first place? And the answer is because of our offenses! Because we are sinners. Because as Jesus tells us, he did come to abolish the Law, he came to fulfill the Law. And the Law cannot be filled, because we are sinners. Paul says that the Law served as our custodian while we were minors. Earlier, we talked about how as children grow they are given more and more freedom. They begin to live their lives out from under the oversight of their parents or caretakers. We needed the Law to take care of us in our childhood. But now faith in Christ has come and we are gifted with greater freedom. We no longer live under the custody of the Law. Paul cites baptism as that point in which we move from minors to full fledged adulthood. Through baptism we are made one, and we become heirs of that same promise made so long ago to Abraham.

 Heirs here is an important word. We know it best from the term “inheritance”. The idea being that what belongs to the father belongs to the son. And Paul doubles down on it. Not only are we children of Abraham, but we are in fact, children of God! He says in Chapter 4 verse 4 that Jesus came at the right time in order to make us adopted…that even the Holy Spirit inside of us cries out to God calling him “Abba, Father!” This is what God does! He takes enemies, sinners, and makes them sons and daughters!

**SLIDE 5: He takes enemies, sinners, and makes them sons and daughters!**

What belongs to him, belongs to us! And what belongs to God?...Everything. Why, Paul asks, would you want to go back to the old system of slavery? Why would you want to try to earn that which is impossible to earn? By faith, you and I, Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female, are made children of the promise. Chapter 5 verse 1: “Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore stand firm and don’t submit to the bondage of slavery again.” It can’t be done through our works or our best efforts, it can only be done in Christ. Jesus is the only human to satisfy the demands of the Law. So it is only through him that you and I can do the same.

 There are some who might say that Jesus came to live the perfect life so that we don’t have to. Through Jesus we have freedom, and so that means we are not under any constraints, no law, no rules and no sin to worry about. We have reached adulthood, we no longer live under the thumb of the Law…but we need to keep reading. Verse 13: “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.” This freedom comes with responsibilities. It comes with the expectation of maturity. It is not a license to go wild. The Law was given so that it would be fulfilled, it is not to be dismissed, but rather we meet the standard of the Law in a new way. Verse 14: “All the law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

**SLIDE 6: Love your neighbor as yourself.**

 And so freedom comes with responsibility. Just as we grow from children living at home following mom and dad’s rules, into adults who have freedom from those rules and yet heightened responsibilities. When I am out on my own, I find that I have bills to pay, and details to attend to that I never had to worry about as a child.

 Christ came to free us from something, the power of sin. But he also came to free us for something, to love others as we would ourselves. This freedom comes as a gift that through faith, we accept. But we also know that freedom must be maintained. Just was our forefathers fought a war to gain their independence, at the same time they had to initiate a whole new mode of governing that would not just replicate the results they fought against. They achieved freedom, but now it had to be maintained. Remember, Paul askes, “Why would you go back into the old system?”

 In order to maintain our freedom, Paul tells us to be guided by the Spirit. He explains that the Holy Spirit is opposed to our flesh. By living out his gifts and bearing his fruit, we maintain this freedom that has been given to us in Christ. Our old selves, our flesh has been crucified with Christ along with its passions and desires. I don’t know if we understand what that means…The desires of the flesh are no more; they are dead. Paul wants the Galatians to live by the Spirit, to love one another, to be joyful, and peaceful and patient and kind, and good and faithful and gentle and self-controlled. By living into this freedom, the whole law is satisfied anyway. It is a win/win.

 So as we celebrate the freedoms we enjoy as Americans, we understand that those freedoms cannot be taken for granted. They need to be maintained. Our government for the people and by the people can become something tyrannical before we know it. It is not a given. In the same way, the freedom we enjoy in Christ can devolve into another form of slavery to rules or to sin if we are not careful to take responsibility to live into the gift we have received and let the Holy Spirit lead us in love.

**SLIDE 7: Holy Spirit lead us in love!**

By faith, we are children of the promise, we are the recipients of grace, and we celebrate our freedom from sin by living by the Spirit! So this Independence Day, as you celebrate our country. Don’t forget to celebrate as well the reality of our salvation. Maybe before that picnic or before going to see fireworks, give Galatians a read through. Remember what freedom really entails. Amen.