

6/29/25 **What Will You Do with the Freedom God Gave You?**

Galatians 5:1, 13-15

Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

There's something deeply inspiring about the word "freedom". It stirs our hearts — whether we're talking about political liberty, personal independence, or spiritual freedom. This Friday is Independence Day, a time when Americans think about, and give thanks for, the freedom we have in this nation. If you asked Americans, an overwhelming majority would say that freedom is a good thing to have. Yet, the truth is freedom can be used well or used poorly. The same freedom that allows one person to act in kind, loving and generous ways can enable another person to commit acts that are dishonest, hateful, or violent. Our personal flaws and weaknesses are often revealed when we have the freedom to act as we choose. If you want to know about a person's character, give that person power, money, or opportunity, and watch what they do with it.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul declares that freedom is a gift from God that can be used for self-indulgence or used in love to serve one another. We honor and celebrate the men and women who have used their God-given freedom to love, serve, and bless other people and make their communities and nations better. If you use your freedom properly and well, you're a blessing to other people. If you don't, you can harm yourself and other people. Soul freedom is not about license to do whatever we want, but about living faithfully and lovingly under the lordship of Christ. There's a responsibility that comes with Christian freedom.

Today, I'd like to walk us through four verses in *Galatians 5* to see what Paul says about **the Gift of Freedom, The Purpose of Freedom, and the Danger of Misusing Freedom.**

The Gift of Freedom, *Galatians 5:1*, "*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" Paul is speaking of the gift of spiritual freedom. Christ came to free us from being slaves to sin and slaves to a law we could never fully obey. In ***John 8:31-34, 36***, "Jesus said, '*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*' They answered him, '*We are descendants of Abraham*

and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free?”” (John 8:31-33). This statement about never being slaves to anyone doesn’t bear up well under historical scrutiny. When these words were spoken, their land was occupied and ruled by the Roman Empire! Historically, the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt, and later, were conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, so it’s hard to understand how they could say we’ve “never been slaves to anyone.” In addition to physical enslavement and being conquered or occupied multiple times in their history, the Law given by Moses had not proven to be life giving, but instead, was a heavy burden and a reminder of the sinfulness of humanity and how frequently people fell short of God’s expectations. In *John 8:34, 36*, “Jesus answered them, *‘Very truly, I tell you, **everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.**’*”

To be free, both from the sway of sin and its consequences, is a gift. To be free, by the presence of the Spirit and our obedience to the teaching and way of Christ, from negative, harmful behaviors, is a gift. To be free from judgment, through the sacrifice of Christ and God’s mercy, is a gift.

Paul gives us two admonitions considering believers’ true freedom in Christ: **first**, that we persevere, “**Stand firm.**” We all need to be reminded when life gets hard, and it will, that we need to stand firm, hold on to faith, and stay on the narrow road that leads to life, rather than quitting or giving up. The **second admonition** is, “*Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” Do not turn back to legalism or self-effort. Legalism is the constant pressure to be perfect and to measure up to a standard that we never can fulfill. It’s also an approach to life that’s externally focused on behavior, while neglecting the inner heart and spirit. Jesus frequently criticized the Pharisees for this approach to faith and life. Self-effort is an approach to life that says, “If I work hard enough and try hard enough and I’m good enough, then God will love me and accept me.” Legalism and self-effort as ways of life are exhausting, draining, and unsatisfying. They’re bad news. The gospel is good news, and that good news is that by placing our trust in Jesus and obeying his teaching, following his example, accepting the forgiveness offered through his death on the cross and the life and power that are available through his resurrection, Christians are truly free to live a life of love, joy, peace, and contentment. Reformer Martin Luther said, “*A Christian man is the most free lord of*

all, subject to none. A Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

The gift of freedom is available to all who will receive it from Jesus.

The **second thing** Paul describes is **The Purpose of Freedom. Galatians 5:13-14**, *“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 slaves to one another.** For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

The purpose of freedom is to use it to love and serve others as Jesus would. Paul describes freedom as a gift from God that can be used well or used poorly. It can be used selfishly or generously, **for self-indulgence or to be slaves to one another.** The phrase **“be slaves of one another”**, which most translations soften to “serve one another”, sounds strong in our self-centered, consumer-oriented culture — and Paul isn’t even directing those words to spouses, who are to have the highest commitment to serving one another in love. He’s directing his words to Christians and to the whole church. Freely we’ve received love from God, not because we’re so lovable or deserve it, but because **God is an insatiable lover of people.** Freely, as we’ve received love, freely we’re to share love, even when people aren’t lovable or we think they don’t “*deserve*” it. Sometimes, people will use their freedom, not in love, but to control and oppress others, or even deny them their freedom. Some of the worst things that humans do to each other are often the result of the improper use of freedom. Freedom includes the freedom to do good or evil, to act basely or nobly. The proper use of freedom includes extending the freedoms we treasure to others, including those with whom we may disagree.

We’re not ultimately free of one another, nor can we be free from God.

“Christianity promises to make people free; it never promises to make them independent.”¹ The paradox of freedom is, the more we submit our will to God’s gracious will and become slaves of Christ, the more fully we become servants of God, the freer we become. The purpose of freedom, for a Christian, is to use it as a servant of Jesus, inviting him to shape and direct how we use our freedom. We can trust

¹ W.R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 1918.

Jesus to guide our freedom more than we can trust ourselves. William James wrote, “*Bondage to the highest is identical with true freedom.*”

Perhaps the greatest use of freedom is the willingness to sacrifice even ourselves for others, as Jesus did. Jesus gave up the freedom he had as a member of the Trinity and took the form of a slave and laid down his life for his friends, that we might be free from sin and free to live a Spirit-filled, abundant, joyful, eternal life. Throughout American history, over one million men and women have freely and courageously sacrificed their hopes, dreams, love, and lives, so we might live as free people. Free to think and speak, to worship, to provide for our families, and to live without fear. It’s important to remember that when you celebrate Independence Day.

Freedom is a gift offered to us by God through Jesus. The purpose of freedom is to use it to love and serve others. The **third and final thing** Paul mentions is **The Danger of Misusing Freedom — Galatians 5:15**, “*If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*” If we use freedom poorly, it frequently brings out the worst in us and in other people. I received a text on Tuesday from someone who attends BBC. I received his permission to share his experience. He wrote, “I was at the grocery store just now and a very upset woman was berating the cashier over some bread that evidently didn’t make it into her bag. I didn’t say anything, but I was thinking, ‘Why are you so upset? It wasn’t intentional.’ I left said grocery store, still thinking about that woman and how awful she treated the cashier. I pulled out onto the roadway and (in my opinion) had plenty of room for the oncoming car. The driver of that vehicle did not agree, and we both made visual pleasantries. I was incredulous and thinking how rude people are, and then...your new commercial came on the radio! Talk about putting me in my place lol.”

In the commercial I said, “How do you respond when a driver pulls out in front of you when they really should have waited? When a check-out person at the grocery store makes a mistake totaling your order, how do you respond? Are you kind and understanding, or do you express irritation? On the other hand, when you make a mistake, how do you want people to treat you? Our lives, and encounters with others, are improved, when we diligently practice the lost art of graciousness, a genuinely kind, compassionate attitude toward others. There’s so much pain in the world and in people’s

lives. We can keep adding to the pile and make life worse for others, or we can help ease the hurt a little bit with a kind word, a gentle spirit, and a friendly smile.”

My BBC friend concluded his text, “I laughed, asked God for forgiveness, and came home to send you this text and to thank you. That simple message reset my day.”

All the verses from Galatians describe **Freedom as a gift from God that can be used well to serve God and to love others or freedom can be used poorly for self-indulgence and for evil.** The human tendency to selfishness means freedom will often be used poorly, leading to prejudice, materialism, promiscuity, abuse, vulgarity, triviality, and violence.

We’re responsible for our decisions and choices. Choosing the path of Jesus means **we Recognize the Relationship of Freedom and Responsibility.** Perhaps we need a Statue of Responsibility to go along with the Statue of Liberty. In a free society, the proper use of freedom means we choose the good when good isn’t the only option. All too frequently, we see someone in a position of leadership charged with financial wrongdoing, we hear another politician speak inappropriately, we hear self-identified Christians engage in cruel and mean-spirited speech or behavior. Sadly, there are so many examples in our culture of the improper use of freedom. While it’s easy to criticize others, we need to reflect on how we’re using our freedom. A significant number of the problems and pain individuals experience, and numerous social ills, are due to the failure to properly use the freedom we possess. What choices do we make with our freedom, each day? Where do we direct our time, attention, and resources? What do we do with our body? What do we watch on television or the Internet? Do we exercise our freedom and responsibility to vote and be good citizens?

Americans will celebrate our freedom from the rule of Great Britain this coming Friday, but Independence Day is also a day to celebrate our dependence on God. **We may think our lives are our own, but they really belong to God.** A woman finished her grocery shopping and returned to her car, only to find four men inside. She dropped her shopping bags, drew a handgun, and screamed, “*I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car.*” The men didn’t wait for a second invitation; they got out and ran like crazy. The woman, somewhat shaken, loaded her shopping bags and then got into the car. But no matter how she tried, she couldn’t get her key into the ignition. Then it dawned on her — she was in *the wrong car*. Her car was parked several

spaces away! She loaded her grocery bags into her own car, and then drove to the police station to turn herself in. The desk sergeant to whom she told the story nearly fell off his chair laughing. He pointed to the other end of the counter, **where four men were reporting a carjacking by an old woman less than five feet tall, with thick glasses, curly white hair, and carrying a large handgun.** No charges were filed.

She thought it was her car, but it really belonged to someone else. We may think our lives are our own, but they really belong to God.² Our freedom, our life, work, loyalty, time, skills, and service, belong to God and are to be used properly, not to indulge ourselves, but for Jesus. May we never forget that the spiritual and political freedom we enjoy has been purchased at an incalculable cost. **What will you do with that freedom?** I pray we will use it not for self-indulgence or as an excuse to sin or do wrong, but that we'll **use our freedom nobly, as servants of God, to love and serve one another.** Poet **Ellen Sturgis Hooper** wrote: "I slept, and dreamed that life was joy; I woke, and found that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy" *The Dial (July 1840)*.

Freedom is a gift from God that can be used well or used poorly. Our flaws and weaknesses are revealed when we have freedom to act as we choose. Freedom not only brings out the worst in people, but it also brings out the best. Freedom cannot be separated from responsibility. Fire in a fireplace warms a home. Fire outside the fireplace burns it down. Freedom, rightly used, gives life; misused, it tears down the very community it was meant to bless.

The proper use of freedom includes extending the freedoms we treasure to others, including those with whom we may disagree. The proper use of freedom means freely choosing to follow Jesus, to learn his ways of living and being, sharing love and compassion, as he did. Perhaps the greatest use of freedom is the willingness to sacrifice even ourselves for others, as Jesus did. What will you do with the freedom God gave you?

² Greg Laurie, "A Time to Worship," *Decision* (November 2001).

Prayer: Lord, you have set us free — not for selfishness, but for love. Teach us to take responsibility for our faith, to honor the freedom of others, and to live in a way that reflects Your grace and truth. May our freedom glorify You. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Blessing:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

“If we continue in Jesus’ word, we are truly his disciples; and we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. And if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

(from 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1; John 8:32,36)

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What does Christian freedom mean to you, personally? How is it different from cultural or political definitions of freedom?
2. Paul warns against using freedom for self-indulgence (*Galatians 5:13*). What are some examples of how people — including Christians — misuse their freedom?
3. Freedom reveals both our weaknesses and our potential. Can you think of a time when having freedom brought out either your best or your worst? What did you learn from it?
4. *“Through love, become slaves to one another.”* What do you think it means to lovingly serve others in today’s world? What are some practical ways we can live this out?
5. Freedom can’t be separated from responsibility. How can we, as Christians, demonstrate responsible freedom in our relationships, workplace, and civic life?
6. Who, in your life, has modeled sacrificial love for you? How did it impact you?
7. *“We may think our lives are our own, but they really belong to God.”* In what areas of your life do you still tend to act like your freedom belongs to you alone? How might God be calling you to surrender those areas?