



June 29 – Freedom

Later this week, we will celebrate Independence Day. There will be parades, carnival rides, food, fellowship, and an abundance of fireworks. The whole day is centered around celebrating our independence as a country. It is the day when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Freedom did not happen right away. It was a long journey between the signing of that document and the end of the war that won our freedom. It was seven long years after the Declaration of Independence before the war ended, and the 13 original colonies were finally freed from the British Empire.

As the apostle Paul starts Chapter 5 in his letter to the people of Galatia, he states “For freedom Christ has set us free.” There is a change in preposition that makes a lot of difference. In September of 1783, the war ended, and the colonies were freed from the British Empire. It was a move away from something. Paul insists that the freedom gained in Christ is not a freedom from that which binds us. It is freedom for a new way of living, directed toward the other. It sounds like a subtle change, or a matter of semantics. I feel it is the most powerful word in this whole chapter, “for.”

Paul goes on to talk about the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. Often these get lumped together as “spiritual” and “worldly” categories. It is not as simple as that. If you look closely at the lists, a theme emerges. The works of the flesh are all ego driven, and ultimately, selfish. Each of these on the list take away from the fullness of the other, all for some form of personal pleasure. Each of these actions break down trust, they break down a sense of community, and they leave behind a path of destruction.

For Paul, it is not enough to seek freedom FROM these works of the flesh. Instead, he speaks of being freed FOR the fruit of the Spirit. This list is the opposite. These fruit of the Spirit are centered on the other. Instead of breaking down community, they build and fortify what is there. Instead of tearing down trust, they build connection. Instead of taking away from the fullness of others, these fruit continue to expand wherever they are shared. Instead of a path of destruction, they strengthen the foundation.

As I think about the National celebrations this week, I cannot help but think of the difference in these two prepositions. We are celebrating our freedom FROM another country. The problem with being freed from, as Paul points out, is that such freedom falls short of providing a mission or direction. It is focused on self instead of being driven toward the aid of others. We are celebrating the end of a war that ended 242 years ago. Now what? Is it enough to be freed from the British Empire? Or is there a greater purpose for our freedom that directs us toward the needs of others?

There is a danger in only looking at being freed FROM. It narrows the focus on oneself and your own desires, whether as individuals, or as a community. Paul pushes us to look beyond ourselves. I think the reading stops one verse short. The reading concludes, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” Which is a beautiful ending thought. Only the letter continues with these words, “Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

Paul knows that there is incredible gravity with human ego. Whether we admit it or not, there is always this tension. We want to achieve success. We get caught up in a scarcity mindset. We become fearful of others, or envious of others. Don’t believe me? Imagine a traffic jam. Suddenly, everyone around you is an enemy trying to get through a little faster. It is human nature.

It is a tough ask to be guided by the Spirit. It takes work. And it never says that with the fruit of the Spirit arguments will never happen. These fruit do not keep you freed from arguments or disagreements. They become the very fruit that holds us together during such times. May we never tire of being guided by the Spirit. For freedom Christ has set us free. May we always be free for our work together. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt