

*2 Chronicles 7:12-14 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. <sup>13</sup>When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, <sup>14</sup>if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

*Galatians 5:13-18 (The Message)*

<sup>13-15</sup>It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

<sup>16-18</sup>My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

*Today, we celebrate our nation and the freedoms with which we are blessed. But, as Christians, we have to remind ourselves that freedom in Christ is something different. It is both "freedom from" and "freedom for."*

July Fourth presents opportunities and dilemmas for preachers. We celebrate America's birthday and this nation's gift of liberty and freedom not only to ourselves but to peoples across the globe. Yet, we preachers know that what the Bible means by freedom has nothing to do with political or even social systems. Karen Engle Layman (no relation!), a UMC pastor in Pennsylvania, once wrote:

"Freedom is a word tossed about a lot in the United States. We tout freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion, and even the right to bear arms. As children of the enlightenment, we believe all people have an inalienable right to freedom. We take it for granted. But in spite of our affirmations about freedom, we argue over what these freedoms mean and to what extent we are free to exercise them. Individual freedom and the rights of the autonomous self to make decisions often conflict with the human community. For instance, we struggle with the freedom of journalists to write and to keep sources secret, and year after year we haggle over prayers in public places, and the NRA and handguns.

Apparently, despite our assertions about freedom, the term confuses us. When I read Galatians 5:1 to the laity in my Bible study, they said, "What on earth does that mean?" They found the statement perplexing. Perhaps we are confused when we read "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1) because Paul means something very different.<sup>1</sup>

Layman notes that, according to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, in the Greco-Roman world the Greek word for "freedom," *eleutheria*, and the Latin word, *libertas*, meant basically 'doing whatever one wants.'

This is probably pretty close to how many of us would define freedom, at least until we had a few minutes to reflect on it. For "doing whatever one wants" is definitely not the biblical meaning of freedom. Hans Kung wrote, "The illusion of freedom is to do what I want. The reality of freedom is to want what God Almighty does." Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

<sup>1</sup> from Karen Engle Layman's reflections on Galatians 5:1-15 in the July 2000 issue of *Interpretation* journal.

### *Freedom from . . .*

In nearly all biblical contexts, freedom is liberty as opposed to slavery. Thus, the OT speaks of freedom from bondage in Egypt, God's great act of salvation. It is vitally important to remember that the giving of God's Law at Mt. Sinai came *after* the Exodus. God chose the Israelites and freed them from slavery *before* God gave them the Law. If you bear this in mind, it will help you to understand why the Jews have never believed that they could earn their way into God's good graces by keeping the Law.<sup>2</sup> They had already experienced God's grace in the Exodus. For an Israelite, it was now a matter of staying in God's grace-created community, not getting in. This meant keeping the Law, especially those very visible markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the food laws that set the Israelites apart from the world around them.

But it is also true that the Law was accompanied by blessings and curses; blessings that would flow from keeping the Law (living rightly with God and one another) and curses, such as exile, that would fall on the Israelites when they did not.<sup>3</sup> Who is surprised that things go well when we love well and things go badly when we do not? Sadly, the story of Israel is much more about the curses than the blessings. Why? Because the Israelites were unable to keep the Law. Sure, they could get their children circumcised and avoid pork, but truly love God and neighbor? That was as difficult for them as it is for us.

Why can't we love as we should? For Paul, one explanation<sup>4</sup> is that we are enslaved to powers that hold us captive (see Galatians 4:8); slavery to these powers is fundamental to the human condition. It is this slavery that explains why we and our world are so messed up. We are slaves to Sin, which Paul speaks of as a cosmic power in 3:22. We are unable to do the simple acts of loving God and loving neighbor each day and in every way.

But we have been freed from this slavery by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has freed us and not we ourselves. It is Christ who has defeated the enslaving powers. It is Christ who has taken upon himself the Law's curses. By his faithfulness all the way to his unspeakable death on a Roman cross, it is Christ who has defeated sin and, hence, death. Just as the ancient Hebrews could not free themselves from Pharaoh, we cannot free ourselves from our own bondage. Salvation is always about what God does, never what we do. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:2, "Did you receive the Spirit because of something *you did*—that is to say because you observed the Law—or did you receive the Spirit as the result of something *God did*—that is to say as the result of the proclamation in which God exercises his power to elicit faith?" (paraphrase of the Anchor Bible translation)<sup>5</sup>.

### *Freedom for . . .*

Jesus Christ has freed us to new life. But what sort of life? How does God hope we will use our God-given liberty? To put a slight twist on it, we are free to do whatever we want, but only so long as our wants are God's wants. And what does God want? Simple: love God and love neighbor. That's what God wanted from the ancient Israelites. That's what Jesus came to preach and to live out in his willingness to lay down his life for us. That's what God does and that's what God wants. As Paul puts it, in Peterson's rendering, "Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself."

Paul's letters can seem pretty daunting at times. The writer of 2 Peter certainly found them to be so (2 Peter 3:15-16). But even Paul reads Scripture as a narrative with a plot, a plot in which he finds himself and these new Christian colonies he is starting and for which he is fighting. If we are going to understand ourselves and our world, we have to find ourselves in this story as well. It is in the larger story of God and his creation that we can find the true meaning of freedom and learn how God desires us to use the freedom he has given us.

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<sup>2</sup>Always remember that the heart of God's Law is to love God and love neighbor. All the rest is the working out of what it means to love. This is why Jesus can speak of his coming to fulfill the Law, not abolish it.

<sup>3</sup>I always get nervous when I start writing about blessings and curses for fear that I'll be misunderstood. But this is an important piece of understanding Paul's letters. Think of them as the consequences that flow from failing to love. The book of Deuteronomy is the great statement of God's Law given to the Israelites after their flight from Egypt. It spelled out the covenant that shaped them into God's people. The giving of the Law in Deuteronomy is accompanied by long recitations of blessings and curses. This was typical of ancient near-Eastern covenants between rulers and their peoples.

<sup>4</sup>This is not the only explanation we find in Paul, but it is key to understanding what he means by slavery and freedom.

<sup>5</sup>From J. Louis Martyn's article, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," in the July 2000 issue of *Interpretation* journal. Martyn was the author of the Anchor Bible commentary on Galatians.

## The Life of the Free

What should our Christian freedom look like? What difference does it really make? Many wonderful, commendable, and important acts of generosity are done by those who do not know Christ. So what makes the gift of freedom in Christ so important? In his commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series (available in our library), Charles Cousar suggests that these questions are better answered by negatives:

(a) The deeds done in Christian freedom are not coerced or done to satisfy a legal demand. They are not pre-formed by a commandment or moral prescription so that the doers are obliged to keep their attention glued on what it is they are to do and away from the recipients of the deeds. Christ frees persons *from* such a law and *for* needy neighbors. To act in freedom is to be guided by the ones whose real needs are to be served.

(b) Free people are not determined in their actions by what sort of response their actions may or may not evoke. They are not miffed when a “thank you” is not immediately received for a contribution made or an important bill passed. They are not deterred when the recipients of a kindly deed do not all rush to vote democrat (or republican) or do not promptly become capitalists (or socialists)—or even reject Christianity. Christian freedom means the demonstration of freedom. Recipients may be witnessed to, but never compelled to answer in a particular way as if they are forever in debt to those who helped them.

(c) Free people are not deceived by over-valuing their moral decisions and their contributions to others as if their freedom depended on what they do. They know that freedom is a gift given, that to act freely is a sign of grace received, and consequently they do not have to be caught up in continually taking stock to see if enough money has been pledged or enough service rendered. How much is “enough”? The characteristically Christian style of life emerges not so much in what is done as in the fact that what is done expresses the freedom given by God, whose call is to selfless, serving love. Such a vocation takes seriously the remarkable paradox expressed in Eph. 2:8–10 where the writer, after affirming that salvation comes by grace and not by works, adds: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (v. 10).”

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, JULY 1 - 7

**Sunday, Esther 1** King Ahasuerus is also known as Xerxes, who met the Spartans at Thermopylae. Why does the king want to get rid of Queen Vashti? What do you make of the men’s response to Vashti’s refusal? A key theme to look for is the inalterability of Persian law. Even the king must cannot set it aside.

**Monday, Esther 2** This sections explains how Esther becomes the Persian queen. In this contest to win the king’s favor, how will the “winner” be chosen? What happens to the contestants who get voted off? Who is Mordecai? What plot does he uncover?

**Tuesday, Esther 3** Who is Haman? Why does Mordecai not bow down to Haman? Why does he hatch a plot to destroy the Jews? What is Haman’s plan? Why do you think the king goes along with it? How do the people respond to the edict?

**Wednesday, Esther 4** Why does Mordecai turn to Esther? How do you think you’d respond if you were in Esther’s place? How does Mordecai persuade her to help out?

**Thursday, Esther 5:1–6:13** Why doesn’t Esther simply plead for the Jews? What are Haman’s immediate plans for Mordecai? What does he have built? Why does the king honor Mordecai? How must Haman be feeling about this “triumph” now?

**Friday, Esther 6:14-8:17** What is the final undoing of Haman? Why doesn’t the king simply reverse the earlier edict?

**Saturday, Esther 9-10** Why do you think that some would still attack the Jews after it is known that they have the king’s blessing to defend themselves? This story is the only book of the Bible that never mentions God. Why do you think it is in the Bible?

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**Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

**Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

You might begin by talking about what you think people mean by "freedom." Make a list of various definitions. How do these contrast with the biblical meaning of freedom discussed in this study? What does Hans Kung's statement, "The illusion of freedom is to do what I want. The reality of freedom is to want what God Almighty does," mean to you? What does God do? What does God want?

Paul speaks of sin as a cosmic power that seeks to enslave us, to hold us captive. Have you ever experienced a problem that had a powerful hold on your own life? Do you think that sin might exert so powerful a force over us that sometimes we can't even see it for what it is?

Paul fights among the Galatians against the powerful temptation to fall back on rigid legalistic systems of morality and law. Who hasn't felt from time to time that life would be much easier if someone, even God, just told us what to do and not do – specifically! Certainly, many Christians have tried mightily to turn the Bible into a book of such do's and don'ts. But, of course, the Bible isn't such a book at all. What are some legalistic systems that tempt us today?

In 5:13, Paul urges us to become slaves to another. We have been freed from slavery to the imprisoning power of sin so that we can become slaves to one another. We've traded one slavery for another! What do you think Paul means by "becoming slaves to one another"? What does this look like in practice? You might recall a point I've made many times in these studies – the best synonym for Christian love is sacrifice. As Richard Hays<sup>6</sup> puts it: ". . . the new life in Christ is characterized by the dynamic reality of 'faith working through love.' Faith that is kindled by God will necessarily issue forth in action. The character of faith's action is defined by 'the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (2:20). Thus love-empowered faith will manifest itself in sacrificial service for others (cf. 5:13-14)."

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<sup>6</sup>from Hays's commentary on Galatians in the *New Interpreters Bible*.