

THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE FREES FOR LOVE Galatians 5:13-15

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new after Sunday morning worship?

INTRODUCTION

What benefits of living in a free nation, like the U.S., do you most appreciate? How would you answer this question: What is the purpose of the freedom that is ours in the U.S.? (Or, For what is our freedom to be used?) How do you think most people in our society might answer that question?

I think probably most of us would answer that the purpose of freedom is freedom. We are free to live how we want as long as we don't infringe upon the freedoms of another by our pursuit of freedom. We are to use our freedom to pursue happiness as we define it as long as our pursuit of happiness doesn't harm anyone else. It seems to me that this is one of the greatest assumptions of our entire culture: we are free so that we can enjoy life as we choose.

Paul, in vv. 13-15, is answering this exact question. He begins by reminding us again that we were called to freedom and then he goes on to tell us how we ought not to use our freedom and how we ought to use our freedom. He is telling us the purpose for which Christ has set us free. In this study we are going to answer this question: for what am I to use the freedom Christ purchased for me?

STUDY

1. Summarize what it is that we have been set free from.

First, we are born willing slaves of sin. As it is the nature of a Panda Bear to eat only bamboo shoots and not steaks or even corn, so it is the nature of humans from conception to love to sin and to not enjoy doing good. We sin because we want to sin and we do not obey God's laws because we do not like God's laws. Thus, as Paul says in Romans 8, we cannot obey God and

we cannot please God. This is complete and utter slavery. We are not able to escape sin because we cannot do what we don't want to do. Second, we are slaves to the basic principles of this world. We live in a world of delusion believing that our performance of certain rituals or behaviors will gain for us ultimate happiness. Some of us believe that if we will obey the 10 commandments, God will reward us with a happy life here and eternal life at death. Some believe that if we'll show up in church or read our Bibles or pray or perform other religious activities we will gain the approval of God. Some believe that if they pray a certain kind of prayer asking Jesus into their heart they will be saved. Others believe that if they offer the first cup of tea and the first morsel of their meal to the idol standing on the shelf then they will be blessed with good health and prosperity. Others believe that if they die killing the infidels then they will immediately gain paradise. Still others believe if they will work hard every day and save their money they will be able to retire at 55 and spend 25 years relaxing. So we daily serve the gods we have made in the empty hope that we will attain "salvation" some day, when in reality we will gain nothing but lose everything. Finally, we are under the condemnation of the true and living God with no hope of appeasing his anger. God is determined to destroy in hell forever everyone who does not obey every word of his law every moment of his or her life. There is nothing we can say or do to escape the death penalty, which justly hangs over each of our heads because none of us can do what God requires because none of us, by nature, don't want to do it.

2. What is the nature of the freedom into which we were called? What does it mean we were "called" into this freedom?

In his infinite love and mercy, God the Son became a man in the person of Christ. He came into the world in order to redeem all who trust in him from the curse of the law. He did this by obeying God's laws perfectly in our place and by bearing the wrath that is due to us in his death on the cross. The good news of God's grace in Christ is that all who trust in Christ are counted perfectly righteous and completely forgiven not because of anything we have done but solely because of what Christ has done. We have been given new life by the Holy Spirit so that we are God's sons and heirs. We actually, by the work of Christ, share in the divine nature. We are free from the enslaving power of sin. We are free from the demands of the law. We are free from condemnation and judgment. We are loved by God and nothing and no one can separate us from that love. We are called

into this freedom, that is, we are free men and women entirely and completely by the work of God's grace and not by our work in any way.

3. For what are we not to use our freedom?

After declaring our freedom Paul gives us the first purpose of our freedom. He says that we are not to use our freedom as an opportunity to serve or indulge or be slaves to our flesh. (The NIV often translates the word "flesh" by the phrase "sinful nature.") In other words, the first purpose of freedom that Paul describes is a negative purpose. He tells us what we are not to use our freedom for.

4. What does Paul mean by the word "flesh" in this context? Compare to his use of the same word in Galatians 3:3. See also Romans 8:1-13 where the word appears 9 times in a similar context, usually translated as "sinful nature."

In this context, flesh stands for confidence in human intelligence, wisdom, and ability to gain a happy life. It is the human commitment to pursue happiness in the manner I decide, without reference to or submission to God and his description of life. Flesh is depending upon my or someone else's interpretation of reality and my living on the basis of that interpretation rather than upon God's interpretation of reality. Flesh believes it has the power to obtain what is most necessary for happiness. If our flesh is religious then we pursue God and heaven by depending upon our performance of rules and rituals; upon our commitments and moral behavior and decisions. This is the way Paul uses flesh earlier in this letter. You can see this in 3:3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by the flesh?" In that context flesh refers to the confidence that I can, by my own work, appease God's wrath and make myself acceptable to God. However, in this context, flesh refers to human desires and actions to achieve a happy life on planet earth. What Paul is talking about here is, in its outward appearance, almost the exact opposite of what flesh does in 3:3. Whereas the person who is seeking to complete salvation by means of the flesh is living an outwardly moral and religious life, the person using his or her freedom to indulge the flesh in this verse is living life as if he has no reason to fear God or to care what God wants.

5. What might be some examples of a person who is using their freedom to be slaves to the flesh?

What Paul is saying here is that Christ did not set you free in order for you to live your life indifferent to God and to his ways. He didn't die so that you can pursue a life of pleasure on earth with no fear of God's judgment. Jesus didn't rise from the dead to give you a free pass to a selfish, self-indulgent pursuit of happiness in whatever way you happen to enjoy. Christ didn't die so you can live as if God doesn't exist without any fear of his judgment. Christ didn't die so you can live as if the purpose of life is drunkenness or sexual stimulation or TV watching or gambling or vacations or a successful career or a happy family. It has been my experience during the thirty years I've been a Christian and involved in the church and Christian ministry that many of the people sitting in our churches view the redeeming work of Christ in this way. I've had professing Christian husbands and wives tell me that they can divorce their spouse and be a Christian because God will forgive them. I've had single men and women tell me they can have sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend and still be a Christian because Christ died for their sins. I've had people tell me they hate other Christians and refuse to be reconciled to them and yet tell me they have no doubt that they are Christians. Many in the Protestant church have actually made a doctrine out of this view by teaching the doctrine of the "carnal Christian." A carnal Christian supposedly is a person who is a Christian, which means a person who has "accepted Jesus", but who has no interest in God or living like a Christian. The freedom we have as a Christian is a real freedom. God is not going to judge us on the basis of our compliance to his law but upon the compliance of Jesus to his law. God is not going to send us to hell for our sins because he sent Jesus to hell for our sins. However, God has not made us free from law keeping and sin and death and hell in order for us to do whatever we want without any consideration for what he wants. Christians don't think that Christ's work for them gives them permission to pursue sin without fear of judgment or to live for themselves with impunity.

6. What does Paul tell us we are to use our freedom for?

He tells us that we are to use the freedom Christ has purchased for us in order to be slaves to one another through love. It really does say that we are to be slaves to one another. There is a word that means "to serve" that Paul could have used but he uses the word that means "to be a slave to someone" here. He usually uses this word to describe our being slaves to God. This is the only time he uses it to describe humans willingly being

slaves to other humans. Christ set you free from law keeping and from sin and from hell so that you will be the slave of other Christians.

7. How does Christ making us “free” serve as the ground and motive for our being slaves to one another?

I am amazed that contrary to every expectation God has forgiven me, sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within me, has promised me eternal life, has declared that I am not guilty of my many sins but perfectly righteous and all because of what Christ did and not because of anything I ever have done. I am free from guilt and death and sin and condemnation and hell and a life spent trying to perform enough good deeds to go to heaven. I'm loved and cannot be harmed and therefore I am free to take risks in order to love others. I don't need to fear being taken advantage of or not treated with respect or gratitude because I have everything I need in Christ and so I can be your slave, let you be my master and serve your needs without thinking about being repaid by you.

8. How does Paul's quoting Lev. 19:16, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself help us to know what we are to do as slaves to other believers? Give some practical examples of what this would look like in your relationships.

It is not hard to figure out how we are to love and serve others. All we have to do is look at how we want others to love and serve us and we'll know how we are to love and serve others. Let me give you an example. Imagine that after church you're standing in the lobby all alone, feeling awkward and wishing that someone would come talk to you. Rather than getting mad and condemning the whole church as a bunch of unfriendly louts what you do is this. You think about the fact that Christ, at great cost to himself has set you free from sin and death and hell. You remind yourself that he commands you to use the freedom he's given you to be a slave to others. Then you go up to someone else who is standing by himself and you do for him what you would like to have done for you. You love him as you love yourself. If the person you approach is cold and does not respond to your friendly overture you do not get mad at him because you don't want people to get mad at you and judge you when you fail to be as friendly as you ought to be. Rather you graciously excuse yourself and look for someone else to talk with and then next week you try again to give a warm greeting and extend friendship to the person who appeared to reject you the previous week.

9. In light of what Paul said in Galatians 3:19, 25 and 5:6, what is surprising about v. 14 and his quoting a command from Leviticus 19:16 as the reason (v. 14 begins with “for”) we should not serve our flesh but rather serve one another? Why does he say this?

With the coming of Christ, the relationship of the child of God to the OT has been forever changed. Christ, by his life, death, resurrection, ascension, present intercession and future return has fulfilled the entire OT. He is the subject matter of the OT. There is no verse in the OT that can be correctly understood without reference to Christ and his saving work. So Paul in this verse helps us to think about how we should understand and apply the OT law. He has just told us in 5:6 that God cares not at all whether you obey his command to circumcise your male children or not. However, in this verse he tells us that God wants us, as free men and women, to obey his command to love our neighbor as ourselves. These are both commands in the OT, yet Paul tells us to obey one and to ignore the other. What Paul is pointing towards is the reality of the new covenant promise in the OT (Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:22-27). God promised that when the Messiah came he was going to give to his people new hearts that would want to obey his law. He promised that he would write his law on our hearts so that, unlike the nation Israel, we would obey God's law because we want to obey out of our love for God and not try to obey it in order to prove that God should be good to us.

However, when we say that God's law is written on our hearts and that we now want to obey God's law that doesn't mean whatever we read in the OT is what we are supposed to do. Leviticus 19, from which Paul quotes this verse, is a chapter that lists about 50 different commands of God. It contains commands regarding the sacrifice of animals. It contains a command not to wear clothing made out of two kinds of fabric and twice commands that we obey all of God's decrees, which includes the command to circumcise children. Yet Paul picks out one command out of this list and says it is the fulfillment of every other command in this list, indeed in the whole OT. Paul is obviously reading the OT in a very different way than he read the OT prior to his conversion to Christ. He is reading it different because Christ has come. The whole OT has been fulfilled in, with and by Christ and you cannot correctly understand a single verse of it without reference to how Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling or will fulfill it.

10. In light of Jesus saying (Matthew 22:34-40) that the greatest commandment is to love God and a second is like to love your neighbor as yourself, how can Paul say that love for neighbor is “the fulfillment of the whole law?”

If you were to ask the vast majority of people in the world, “Do you love God?”, most would tell you that they do love God. But how do you know if you love God? Do you know you love God because you raise your hands when you sing at church? Do you know because you read the Bible or because you share the gospel whenever you get a chance? Do you know you love God because you’ve taken a vow of chastity and poverty or become a Protestant missionary or die as a martyr when you blow yourself up to kill the infidels? Do you know you love God because you won’t let your children watch Harry Potter movies or wear lipstick? God is invisible and thus it is not easy to determine if the various expressions of religious piety are truly out of love for God or not. Hypocrites are very good at fulfilling the duties of piety. Love for neighbor, especially your Christian neighbor is the only sure and certain evidence that you love God. Only those who have been set free by Christ willingly make themselves the slave of others, especially of those others who do not love them in return. The apostle John says it this way, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” John Calvin says in his commentary on this verse, “God therefore chooses to make trial of our love to himself by that love of our brother, which he enjoins us to cultivate. This is the reason why... love is called ‘the fulfilling of the law’, not that it excels, but that it proves the worship of God to be real.... Love to men springs only from the fear and love of God; and therefore we need not wonder if, by a figure of speech, in which a part is taken for the whole, the effect (love for neighbor) include under it the cause (love of God) of which it is the sign.”

11. On the basis of v. 15, what appears to be happening in the Galatian church?

The churches are full of ongoing and unresolved conflicts. The churches are dividing into opposing camps and are out to destroy one another through slander, anger, bitterness, etc.

12. In light of vv. 1 & 13, what would Paul say is the reason this is happening?

They are using their freedom to destroy one another. They are living under the yoke of slavery and thus have none of the power that only the gospel can give them.

13. What is the only way to build a community that does not eventually self destruct?

In v. 15 he shows that the end of every other system of living always ends in human conflict and ultimately the destruction of human society. If you live according to the flesh, whether religious or non-religious self-dependence, you will end up fighting with others and destroying the community of which you are a part. What Paul is saying here is what the Bible says everywhere, all human conflict is a result of the conflict that human beings are in with God. Cain murdered Able because he hated God. Whenever you are embroiled in a fight with another person it is because you are not living in the freedom that God has given you in Christ. You are either returning to the yoke of slavery of self-justification or you are using your freedom as an opportunity to serve your sinful nature. Human conflict is not due to the issues over which you are fighting it is always due to the fact that one or both of the parties involved are not living in the freedom that Christ has won. If Christ has set me free then I have everything I need and you cannot take from me anything that is necessary for life. Therefore, I don’t need to fear you nor do I need you to make me happy. So I am free to love you. I won’t get mad at you because my goal is not to have you love me but for me to love you. But if I’m not free in Christ or I’m using my freedom to serve my flesh, then you can harm me. You can interfere with my getting what I believe I must have to be happy. When you interfere with me, that makes me mad and I’m going to make you pay for what you’re taking from me. I will bite and devour and eventually consume you, our relationship and the community of which we are a part.

14. How are you doing at using your freedom to be a slave?

Jesus Christ made us free so that we will not be slaves to our flesh but so that we will be slaves to one another and thus obey God and not destroy our family and our church.