

The Freedom of the Religion of the Cross
Galatians 6:7–18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, amen.

As we worship here in relative comfort and freedom this morning, how many refugees are there in the world? About 80 million, the highest ever recorded.¹ People everywhere wish they were somewhere else, somewhere not so dangerous or impoverished or overcrowded or oppressed. They are risking their lives to get somewhere where they can be free.

At another level, who can count the songs that yearn for freedom: from Born To Be Wild by Steppenwolf to Come Sail Away by Styx to Don't Fence Me In by Cole Porter to Free Bird by Lynyrd Skynyrd to Free Woman by Lady Gaga.

One website lists 2,797 songs with freedom as their theme.

The most profound freedom is freedom of the soul. Paul's letter to the Galatians speaks of "the freedom we have in Christ Jesus" (2:4). It asserts: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (5:1). It says: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free" (5:13).

The Protestant Reformation revived the Bible's good news that there is freedom in Christ. This evening/morning we are going to explore (1) the shape of that freedom, (2) the threat to that freedom, and (3) the resolve of that freedom.

(1) First, **the shape of that freedom**. Why do I say *that* freedom? Because I'm talking about a certain kind. I'm not talking about political liberty. I'm not talking about financial freedom. I'm not talking about being freed on parole following arrest for a crime.

¹ https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states-2021?gclid=Cj0KCQjwwNWKBhDAARIsAJ8HkhfxAP9L6Oj1edWme7uA_RVJcgv5Ses6QexVeYQEHBj4Exef_JEB5-IaAt4nEALw_wcB

I'm talking about what Galatians calls freedom in Christ. This is the very core of what Martin Luther and John Calvin and other Reformers discovered that the Roman Catholic church was suppressing.

They helped established the Bible's good news that we find freedom when it hits us that our lives are empty, guilt-ridden, lacking meaning. We hear the message that God the Almighty took on flesh in Jesus. Jesus was and is the Son of God, one with the Father through all eternity. On this earth, Jesus lived a sinless life. He took on our sin in his death. He rose from the dead, defeating death, and ascended into heaven. He sits at God's right hand interceding for his followers. He will return in judgment and glory. When we trust him, he becomes our savior. We learn from him as he directs our lives.

Through this good news, Jesus calls every person here and worldwide to turn from themselves to him. Freedom in Christ means trusting him, learning from him, worshiping through him, living for him. When and only when we know him, he sets us free.

Our Galatians reading touches on several aspects of what trusting in Christ frees us to enjoy. I will mention just two.

1. First aspect. Verses 7 and 8 describe the freedom of an assured future. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

"God cannot be mocked" means people who mock God by ignoring him or denying him or opposing him and/or his Son will face the consequences eventually, whether in this life or the life to come.

Sowing to please the flesh means living however we want. "Flesh" in v. 8 means the self without a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. Earlier Paul talked about what "the flesh" typically produces in our lives. I will read the list. Every one of us is guilty of one or more of these expressions or impulses recently and probably even already this morning.

Gal 5:19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions: 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Freedom in Christ loosens the chains of these behaviors. We live differently because we are not wallowing in these behaviors; we are seeking and finding higher roads. We are sowing to the Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ who frees us, in fact. He assures of eternal life, not destruction, like the end of the first answer to Q. 1 of the Heidelberg catechism says: "Because I belong to him, Christ by his Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." *Not* for the flesh.

That's freedom, the freedom of an assured future. God promises it in Christ.

2. A second aspect of what trusting in Christ frees us to enjoy is found in v. 10. "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." It is a great freedom to have the inclination to do good to other people. Too many people see others in need and do nothing.

But in Christ we realize how God reached down to us in our needy state. When we lay battered and bloody in our lostness, like the Good Samaritan in the parable, the Lord Jesus went to the cross. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

When that gets in your head and heart, it's a life-changer. Doing good grows into a positive habit.

Years ago I was leaving a meeting in Boston. I had just enough time to get to the airport, maybe. This required the subway and bus transfers. I stood mystified at the ticket kiosk at evening rush hour pondering what buttons to push. What I felt like pushing was the panic button.

But right then an African American wearing a hard hat and construction coveralls stopped. The crowds surging by jostled us. He said, "Where you headed?" "Logan Airport," I said. He held out his hand. I gave him the credit card I was holding. He put it in the slot. He pushed several buttons. Tickets curled out of the dispenser. I don't remember now the directions he gave me, but they worked.

He did good to me, a complete stranger, just right out in public helping someone he never saw before and would never see again. But I suspect I will see him in heaven and thank him then. How different our world would be if we had more helpers and fewer haters.

In Christ we are primed to become skilled and practiced in helping others in general and especially within the church. That's freedom!

But there's a problem. In St. Louis recently a man stopped to give a woman and her son a ride. He was doing good to them. When they asked to be let off, he stopped his car for them to get out. The woman said give me the keys. The man was taken aback. He hesitated. The boy, who was 11, produced a handgun and proceeded to pistol-whip the driver. He and mom drove off with the car.

There's a lot of evil in the world. People live in the chains of greed and thievery, lies and laziness, immorality and self-indulgence, rage and revenge. Why doesn't God do something?

He did. This brings us to our second point, **the threat to that freedom** that God offers in Christ. We find it in vv. 12–13.

12 Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. **13** Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.

A huge threat, in fact a barrier, to Christian freedom is false religion. In Christ God has acted to free us from self-destruction by our personal and corporate sin, guilt, and selfishness which so often hurts others rather than helps them. But people suppress the good news and replace it with the oldest form of fake news. For lies about God go all the way back to Eden.

In vv. 12 and 13 Paul describes false teachers. No doubt they meant well. Maybe some of the Afghan Taliban do too. But Jesus said: you will know wannabe religious leaders by their fruits. The fruits of these false teachers were bitter and dangerous. They were saying that to be right with God, trust in Jesus crucified and risen was not enough. They were Jews. They prized a heritage going back to Abraham, when God instituted circumcision as a sign and seal of the covenant he made with Abraham and his descendants. They said that to be saved, men in Israel

had to be circumcised. All Israelites must follow the Mosaic law like they understood it. We know from the Gospels that this was different from how Jesus understood it. Paul in Galatians is siding with Jesus.

Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous through faith years before he was circumcised. Romans 4 makes that point. Salvation is a matter of the heart. Saving faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. God saves sinners by the mystery of undeserved grace. He creates in us a new heart, gives us new vision, directs us in new paths. This all comes through faith, which results in works, but is not based on those works.

It is false teaching which says we are not saved only by Jesus' death for our sins: we must add our good works to the mix. Lots of religions teach this. Some branches of the church teach this. Paul denies this.

Moreover, look again at v. 12. People who minimize the cross, Jesus' death for our sins, by teaching that our good deeds complete the cross are conveniently avoiding the scandal of the cross which often brings derision and persecution. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, every year about 90,000 Christians die because of their Christian faith. That's 247 daily. The religion of the cross is a lethal provocation for Islamic movements across Africa who hate what the cross stands for and kill to prove it. Christians in Hindu India die daily for their faith in the crucified Lord.

In the NT era Paul and many others were hounded and executed for confessing and following Jesus crucified and risen.

The martyrs through the ages and around the world today call out: Don't give up the freedom you have to know God, to know forgiveness of your sins, to know assurance of eternal life, by adulterating the message that Christ saves us through faith apart from meritorious works.

Don't get bagged by the trophy-hunters we read about in v. 13: "they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh." False teachers love to see converts because it flatters their ego and confirms their self-importance. It glorifies them, though not Jesus Christ, the only one worthy of glory.

Years ago in Montana a friend of mine, a new Christian, fell in love with a Mormon girl. She was beautiful. She shared with my friend and with me the plan of salvation. A big part of it was your works. My friend attended their worship services. He was almost persuaded.

But at a Christmas season gathering, when people in the Mormon meetinghouse were giving testimonies, my friend went to the open mike. The crowd eagerly awaited. Was he about to join? That would be a real coup. My friend said to the hushed assembly, "I just want you to know that . . . you are all wrong."

Maybe that was a little too direct. But maybe that was what he was supposed to say. In any case, he made the right decision to base his life and eternal hope on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness, not his own achievements. He is a faithful and fruitful disciple of Jesus now nearly 50 years later.

As Galatians ends, we come to our third point, **the resolve of that freedom**, that freedom that comes through trust in Christ who died and commitment to Christ who calls us take up our cross and follow him. Notice v. 14: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." What does that mean?

It means this. Since we do not rest in the merit of our achievements, we see the world through the lens of Jesus' crucifixion, which gives meaning and value to the world. That is what "the world has been crucified to me" signifies. Paul sees the world like Jesus' death teaches him to view the world. We learn from the cross four lessons:

1. Jesus' crucifixion points to God's love. By dying for the world Jesus showed God's love for the world. Jesus' disciples are sent out to show God's love for the world too.
2. Jesus' crucifixion points to the Lord's Table. Jesus' death was preceded by a Passover meal, which Jesus instituted as an ordinance for his followers to observe. When we eat that bread and drink that cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. We see the world in need of Jesus' shed blood. As the church we proclaim Jesus to the world. The pastor's closing words at communion remind us of the power God conveys through communion: "The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in his grace." Truer words cannot be spoken.

3. Jesus' crucifixion points to the prayer, the communion with the Father, that sustained Christ in his hours of agony. Think of Gethsemane. Think of Jesus' words of prayer to the Father on the cross. As we live out Jesus' life, sometimes it involves hard consequences. Prayer equips us to bear hardship and injustice and loss with grace and strength to complete the mission Christ has for us day by day until we are with him.

4. Jesus' crucifixion points to the world's opposition to God and his kingdom. It has ever been so since man rebelled in the Garden. Revelation 12:9 speaks of "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." Jesus said to his disciples, If the world hated me, it will hate you too. Now often the world doesn't hate us, it just ignores us. Or maybe I'm so insipid in my Christian identity that I get a pass because I'm no threat.

But when Paul said: "the world is crucified to me," he was recognizing the opposition of the world to Christ and to his body the church. That's why he says in 6:17: "From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks [στίγματα] of Jesus." He was ready for it because he lived in the freedom of fidelity to his Lord even when it hurt.

When Paul says I am crucified to the world, I'm sure he meant many things. But one was: as Christ offered himself to the Father's good pleasure by his life and death, even death on a cross, so I offer my life in worship, proclamation, service, love, and encouragement to others, witness to others, prayer for others, outreach to others.

I conclude with Paul's closing insight in v. 15: "what counts is the new creation." He is repeating his earlier words in 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

That's the new creation in a nutshell. Have you been created anew? Do you have a faith in Christ that has rocked your life and altered your direction? Then celebrate and hang on: it's an adventure that just gets crazier as it gets richer.

If you're thinking about treating Jesus like he deserves by trusting and following him, be assured: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Get ready by making ready. Put your faith in him and find eternal freedom.

Let us pray. God in heaven, thank you for our freedom in Christ and for the Reformation gospel, the Galatian good news of the cross, that sets us free to trust you, serve you, and treasure you, the Lord over all, today and forever.

Amen and amen.