

Gal. 5:13 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. **14** For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **15** If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Rom. 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. **15** I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. **16** Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. **17** But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. **18** For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. **19** For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. **20** Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. **22** For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, **23** but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. **24** Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? **25** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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For Freedom You Have Been Set Free

Galatians 5:13-15

Romans 7:14-25

The word freedom may well be the most precious word in our American vocabulary, maybe more so than the word democracy. After all, we are the Land of the Free, not the land of democracy. "Give me liberty or give me death," said Patrick Henry. But, what is it we celebrate this time each year? What is freedom?

Take a listen to part of a video that asks people that same question. Listen especially to the number of times the words "want" and "wish" are used.

You can do whatever you want to do.

The ability to express whatever you want to express.

Be able to speak when you want to speak. Dress the way you want to dress, act the way you want to act.

Freedom means being able to do what you wish when you wish as long as it's within the limits of law, ethics and morality.

We might think of this as external freedom: the ability to go where we want; work where we want to work; live where we want to live. But there is another internal world of freedom, as well.

Internal freedom includes believing what you want to believe, but it also means being free from fears, anxieties, guilt. So many of us live under the "tyranny of the urgent," spending our days trying to juggle a dozen different balls. We don't have time for *important* things because *urgent* things take all of our time.

I think one of the greatest threats to our freedom is the delusions we have about how free we really are. Sometimes we don't realize how free we are; other times we don't realize how un-free we are.

In one sense, we are often more free than we realize. Sometimes we voluntarily limit our own freedom by thinking we are less free than we are, or by putting ourselves into situations where our freedom is limited. Sometimes we are given a set of circumstances we can't do anything about, and it's easy to feel like our freedom has been taken from us. I recently heard that a friend of mine, a minister five years younger than me was recently diagnosed with a type of cancer for which there is no cure. With therapy, he may have another five to seven years to live. There's nothing he can do about that. But he is free to determine his attitude about it, and what he does with the time he has.

We all have challenges in life we may feel take away our freedom. We feel trapped and limited by them. But we do have choices in how we approach those challenges, more freedom than we think.

On the other hand, we also have a tendency to think we are freer than we are.

We define freedom as the ability to do what we want, if we get up in the morning and wear what we want, eat what we want, work where we want, or study what we want, we think we are free, but we don't consider the factors that make us want what we want. We fail to see that what we want is formed and fashioned by our culture, by our friends, by our hormones, by the media repeating over and over certain messages until they become part of our psyche and we don't even realize how much we've been influenced, some would even say controlled by the messages we hear every day.

So, on the one hand, we think we are freer than we are, and on the other hand, we give up our freedom by the choices we make or fail to make,

Our two scripture passages have to do with these two extremes.

In Romans 7, Paul admits that he isn't as free as he wants to be, not because someone else is limiting him, but because he limits himself. He wants to live by God's will, but something inside keeps him from doing it. *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."*

This is the great battle constantly raging within us between the part of us that wants to do the right thing, and the part that keeps doing the wrong thing. Finally, Paul practically cries out: Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Only the grace we receive through his death and resurrection offers us the salvation we cannot achieve for ourselves.

On the other hand, so often we use our freedom to voluntarily go back into slavery. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is chiding the Galatians because they are listening to certain people who are telling them that in order to be true Christians, they also must be Jewish, that the men and boys must be circumcised, and that they all must subject themselves to following all of the hundreds laws of the Jewish scriptures, purity laws, sacrificial laws, not just the Ten Commandments, but also the other hundreds of

laws that good Jews were required to keep.

Paul says, "Why are you doing this?" Jesus' death on the cross has saved you, has made you righteous before God, has set you free from having to try to keep of those laws. He says, "For freedom you were set free." You were set free in order to live as free people. Jesus didn't die on the cross to set you free from your sins so that you would go back to enslaving yourselves needlessly.

This is one of the most important lessons the Bible has to teach us: how often we needlessly subject ourselves to forms of slavery we don't have to be enslaved by. Jesus continually teaches us this same lesson. He says that when we worship other gods, we give up our freedom. He tells the rich young ruler who asks how he can inherit eternal life to go and sell all his possessions, give to the poor, then come follow Jesus. When the wealthy young man walks away, Jesus watches him go and laments, "How hard it is for a wealthy person to be saved. Camels fit through the eye of a needle easier than rich people fit through the gates of the kingdom." Bertrand Russell sees the truth Jesus is teaching when he says, "*It is the preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly.*"

Jesus also tells us we also give up our freedom when we allow ourselves to worry about things we have no control over, and fail to trust that God is with us. In a sense, worrying is looking into the future and seeing bad things happening, but failing to see that God is there in the future, too. "*Why do you worry about what you will eat, or what you will wear?*" Jesus says. "*Unbelievers worry about those things. Your Father in heaven knows what you need before you do. Look at the flowers, how they are beautifully adorned. Look at the birds of the air who always find enough to eat. Don't you think you are more important to God than flowers and birds?*"

We do that a lot – enslaving ourselves, giving up our freedom to the love of money, to worry, to carrying grudges. Those who keep smoking or drinking or doing drugs, or going deeper into debt, thinking they are exercising their freedom to do what they want, are really giving up their freedom and voluntarily becoming slaves to the very thing they think shows their freedom.

Paul says to the Galatians, "*You were called to be free, but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.*" It turns out that self-indulgence seems like freedom, but it actually is the pathway to the loss of freedom. Paul says, the path to true freedom is serving others. "*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.'*" Serving your own desires and wants, especially when it means being cruel or selfish toward others, takes away your freedom, and theirs, too.

Our freedom, it turns out, is most wonderfully achieved not when we do whatever we want, but when we willingly subject ourselves to God, and to each other. Think about a choir or an orchestra. In order to be free to soar to heights of musical majesty, they have to subject themselves to a lot of rules and a lot of people. The rules of music – they've got to sing or play on key, and in rhythm. They've got to follow the rules of the composer and play the notes the composer has written; come in the right time and stop at the right time. They've got to follow the rules of the conductor or director. They are not free to play or sing off key or out of rhythm, or to play notes not written in the score, and they're certainly not free to not follow the director. But, when they submit to those rules and those people, the result is something that is so much greater than their own freedom could achieve.

To live as free people is not just to live among a group of people who are all doing what they want. It is to voluntarily choose to become a servant of Jesus and the love he shows us by his actions and teaches us by his words. It is to understand that, as the great song by Bob Dylan says, "You're going to have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

When we delude ourselves into thinking that doing whatever we want means we are free, before we know it, we are serving something that does not lead to freedom. But when we offer our lives – or better put – acknowledge that none of us is free until we find our freedom in Christ, and commit ourselves to worshiping, serving, and living for him; living in love for God and our neighbor, then we will understand what true freedom is.