

Free to Love and Serve

Galatians 5:13-15

John Breon

A Dutch pastor who was helping Jews escape the Nazis was himself caught. He was loaded into a boxcar with several Jews and others to be sent to a concentration camp. It was a long, frightening journey through the night. Finally the train stopped, the doors opened, and lights were shining in their faces. They thought their worst fears were fulfilled and then they realized that something unexpected was happening. People were cheering and singing. And the folks on the train discovered that they were in Switzerland, safe in the hands of people who cared for them. Someone, somewhere, had dared to switch the track. Instead of captivity and death, they were given freedom and life.

The pastor, telling this story, asked, "What do you do with a gift like that?"

In this letter to the Galatians, Paul describes a tremendous gift—the gift of being freely justified by God's grace. Jesus gives this grace. He has set us free. Verse one of chapter 5 captures the message of the whole letter in a single powerful statement: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." That sums up what he's been saying and it introduces what follows. The freedom Christ gives is release from bondage, from sin, and from all our attempts to get right with God on our own. It's the freedom of reconciliation, a new relationship with God, our self, and others. It's the freedom of new life, a new way of living. Freedom isn't only an exit from every form of slavery, it's also an entrance into a new life of belonging to God and God's people.

Paul has announced and described this freedom in the first four chapters of the letter. Now, in chapters 5 and 6 he says, "What do you do with a gift like that?" How do we express, how do we live in this freedom that Jesus has given us?

Verses 13-15 of chapter 5 summarize what Paul says about Christian living in the freedom of God's grace.

He reinforces the concept of freedom. "You were called to be free." The Galatians were being tempted to submit to another bondage. Certain Christian missionaries of Jewish background thought that Gentiles had to become Jews to be Christians. They were trying to convince the Galatian Christians that they needed to submit to Jewish identity markers, like circumcision, to be truly Christian. Paul opposes this in the strongest way.

He says if they submit to that demand, they'll be obligated to obey the whole Jewish Law. Then they will have fallen from grace because they'll be seeking another way to be right with God and live as God's people. And God's grace is the only basis for a right relationship with God.

In Christ we are free. But this is responsible freedom. Paul says, "Don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh/the sinful nature" (v. 13). We're not free to do anything we feel like doing. This is freedom from sin, from trying to get right with God, from being all tied up in ourselves. It's freedom to live the way God wants us to and to serve one another in love by the power of God's Spirit.

A little earlier (v. 6) Paul said, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself or working through love." This was one of John Wesley's favorite verses. It sums up the Christian life. Faith is not just passively receiving. Faith works. And it works through love. Faith is the root and love is the fruit. Faith and love can't be separated. If we have faith, we will love. Genuine faith expresses itself through love.

Our freedom in God's grace allows us to serve one another in love. We use our freedom to become slaves and serve one another as slaves in love. The whole Law is fulfilled in the word, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). We know when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he cited this along with the call to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28-31).

Christian freedom is willing to serve. We're free, not to hold onto our lives and parcel out bits of service. We're free to give ourselves away in service. And we find even greater freedom through discipline and service.

Not only does freedom require the discipline of service, freedom requires love. Love is the guide for our Christian freedom. God's grace in

our lives overflows in love. And God's grace and forgiveness set us free to express that love.

When Nancy and I were first dating, one evening as I was leaving, I said, "I think the words 'I love you' would be appropriate." What a romantic! I wasn't used to expressing love verbally. I'm still growing in love and ways to express love. I continue to develop loving habits. That's what growing as a Christian is like. We learn how to love God's way. We develop loving habits. We're learning to let faith express itself through love. And when we allow faith to work through love, amazing things can happen.

Love moves us to see people as they really are and to extend grace to them where they are. Junius Dotson is the General Secretary of United Methodist Discipleship Ministries. He was the guest teacher at Annual Conference this year. His theme is "see all the people." Like the little rhyme: "This is the church, this is the steeple; open the door and see all the people." But he says don't just see the people inside, but open the door, get out into the community, and see all the people all around. Paul says a little bit later in Galatians, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (6:10). We do serve one another in love in the church, but we also serve everyone we can.

We have to see people so we can serve them. Junius relates a story about a car designer named Brian Peterson. One day he decided to talk to Matt Faris, a homeless man Brian passed every day on his way to work. One day Brian decided to say hello. Then he apologized for having passed Matt for so long and not saying hello. Matt recalls that Brian started that first conversation by asking him lots of questions, questions most people never asked him, like: What do you want to do with your life? Brian recalls that something about Matt captured his heart, so he asked if he could paint his portrait. This encounter led to friendship. Brian says that the reason he finally stopped to speak to Matt is that "everyone deserves to be seen with the eyes of love" (*Engaging Your Community: A Guide to Seeing All the People* 35).

Junius also tells about an experiment conducted by Amnesty Poland in 2016, during the European refugee crisis. It was based on an experiment

by American psychologist Arthur Aron twenty years earlier. Refugees and Europeans were paired up. Each pair was to sit silently and look into each other's eyes for four minutes. Let's watch this five minute video about it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7XhrXUoD6U>).

We are free in Christ to see other people the way God sees them. We're free to see each other in love and to serve each other in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Who knows what faith working through love can do?

Lewis Grizzard was visiting his home church in Moreland, GA. It had been more than ten years since he'd been there. He recalled when he was in youth group—Methodist Youth Fellowship. Two rough boys in town had been caught breaking into a store. The judge, as part of their rehabilitation, required them to attend MYF for six months. Their first night there, they beat up two fifth grade boys. A counselor, the woman who brought the cookies, got onto them. They threw a Cokesbury hymnal at her. She ducked, then gave them a stern look and stared them down. She said, "Jesus doesn't approve of what you're doing and I don't approve either." Then her voice softened as she said, "But if Jesus loves you and forgives you, I guess I'll have to. Now have some cookies."

Lewis said the last time he heard, those two boys were both fathers with honest jobs who never missed church on Sunday. Then he said, "I think that was the first miracle I ever saw" (*Kathy Sue Loudermilk, I Love You 10*).

Let's remember that Christ has set us free. And let's use our freedom to serve one another in love.