

FREED BY CHRIST TO LIVE BY THE SPIRIT

“Christ has set us free.” Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The text for our sermon comes from the Epistle lesson read a few moments ago from the fifth chapter of Galatians, that great book of Christian freedom. Dear friends in Christ-- every year around Easter time, ABC shows the great epic movie the *Ten Commandments*. Charleton Heston, proudly wearing an NRA hat, is Moses, who leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness on a long journey to the Promised Land. For those of you too young to know, the Ten Commandments came out in the 1950's, starring former National Rifle Association president and actor Charlton Heston. Even though the moviemakers embellished the true story of the Exodus quite a bit, as Hollywood often does, one of the biblical truths that does come through loud and clear is the rebellious state of the people of Israel. Time after time, even following God's mighty acts of salvation, they are ready to turn back to slavery. For them, life in slavery was better than putting their trust in a God who had saved them through mighty acts of His power. We can easily watch the Ten Commandments and shake our heads, wondering how the Israelites could be so blind not to see the deliverance of God and instead wanting to return to slavery. But has human nature really changed all that much in the centuries since the Exodus? Does human nature really put its trust in a gracious God and not want a return to bondage? Paul didn't think so- he saw our human nature constantly striving to put itself into slavery, and the worst slavery of all. This slavery does not simply take away our freedom- it leads to death, eternal death.

In our text today, Paul uses the term 'flesh' to describe this slavery, not because our physical bodies are evil in themselves, but because our bodies have been wholly corrupted by sin through the Fall. For Paul, the flesh is not something physical, but is a life lived opposed to God. In verses nineteen through twenty-one of our text, Paul describes life in the flesh by the deeds done in the flesh. **“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”** We could spend several hours going into every one of these vices, but Paul gives us a nice summary in verse seventeen: **“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit.”** The life lived in the flesh is a life lived in opposition to God's holy Law, a life lived in rebellion against Him. A life lived in this way, as Paul says at the end of verse twenty-one, does not inherit the kingdom of God. Those who commit these sins are trapped in the slavery of sin, and that bondage delivers them up to death.

But these four walls do not make us immune to this bondage, because the Christian Church is full of slaves to sin. How often have you seen gossip or conflict in the church? How often have we not put the best construction on everything, and have opposed both our fellow Christians and the shepherds sent by Christ to us? How often have we allowed our own jealousies and personal rivalries interfere with the mission given by Christ? How often have we focused on our own ambitions instead of on Christ? This church community was founded on Christ, not on me or you or any other person. What Paul says sarcastically in verse fifteen speaks volumes to us: **“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”** How tragic is the division of the church by those who bite at each other, but it pales in comparison with the form of slavery that is the focus of this text and the book of Galatians- a voluntary return to the Law by those who have been set free by Christ.

In today's world, we want to be independent, 'self-made' people, and we gobble up self-help books by the thousands that teach us how to do everything from lose weight to run a computer. Because of this, we simply cannot fathom that anyone would give us a gift that we don't have to earn ourselves in some way. And this goes for our spiritual life as well- the popularity of the *Purpose-Driven Life*, with its idea that we can please God through our own obedience to Him, shows that this is true. As a consequence, we often rebel against the free grace of God and try to earn God's favor through our own works. We view church attendance and the Lord's Supper as something we do to appease God. Even all the time we spend on various boards or church

groups can be used to show God our commitment to Him. Our kindness to those around us will surely give us some 'brownie points' with God, won't they? Surely God will give us salvation because we have tried to live a good life, right? Our human nature wants to stand before God on the Last Day and say, "Let me into your glory, Lord, I've led a good life." My friends, this is exactly what Paul warns us about in verse one of our text: **"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** Trying to earn God's grace through our own good deeds and 'good life' is a path in bondage to the Law. Living in this way returns us to slavery, and it is the worst slavery of all, because we think that we are earning God's favor when we are actually despising His grace!

This slavery has no hope of saving us, because it is the yoke of the Law. After working and toiling for our entire lives to please God with our works, the only reward we can receive is the condemnation of God. Living as slaves to the Law is no better than living in open sin our entire lives. In fact, open sin is better, because it does not give us the delusion that we are actually serving God. Whether we live in rebellion or in dependence on the Law, we are living in the flesh, and Paul tells us that the **"desires of the flesh are against the Spirit."** Faced with this terrible fact, where do we turn? What option is there for those who live in open sin or have trusted in their own goodness for salvation? If both paths lead to eternal condemnation, what hope do we have? Where can we turn? The simple answer is that we cannot do anything to release ourselves from the slavery of sin or the Law. Therefore, God did it all.

Christ, true God and true man, came down to this earth to set us free, to rescue us from the bondage of sin and the Law. He became a slave like us and walked this earth, fulfilling the demands of the Law on our behalf, not falling into any of the sins on Paul's list of fleshly works which we read before and completely embodying what Paul writes in verses twenty-two and twenty-three: **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."** Then He was bound by sinful men and became a slave in every sense of the word, beaten and accused for crimes He did commit, then was led to the cross. He could have turned back from the cross, as we have often turned back to the yoke of slavery, but instead He went to Golgotha and there shed His blood- the sinless Son of God crucified like a slave. And that truly is the most important part. While we remained slaves to sin, Christ died like a slave to grant us freedom, and rose again victorious to take the keys of slavery away from death and the devil. As God delivered the Israelites of old from Egypt, so Christ delivered us through His own Exodus.

But freedom on paper is no use unless Christ actually comes to us and sets us free- taking the keys to our chains won from death and Satan and releasing us. In Exodus, God saved His people when He had Moses stand before the Red Sea to part the waters, giving His people salvation through water. Today, Christ also gives us salvation through water. In verse thirteen of our text, Paul writes that we were **"called to freedom."** Who called us and when did this happen? In our Baptism- by Christ Himself! Though the washing of water with the Word, the Holy Spirit set us free with the freedom that Christ won through the cross and empty tomb. In Baptism, we are set free from the bondage of sin and the Law. We are free from the condemnation of the Law and the power of sin to condemn us eternally!

Moreover, the Holy Spirit comes to us in Baptism and we live by Him. The Spirit therefore shapes our lives as He works within us, strengthening our faith so that we stand firm in our freedom. We are now free to be who we are as Baptized children of God, showing to those around us the love that Christ showed us. Paul writes in verses twenty-two and twenty-three that **"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."** These things are the fruits produced by the Spirit in us- they are the works of the Holy Spirit in and through us. Because of who we are as children of God, set free by Christ, we show that same love to others. The love that Christ showed on the cross, when He became a slave for we who were slaves to sin, flows out through us to a world that is still in bondage. Therefore, the cross shapes our lives as those set free by Christ.

Paul describes this baptismal life of the Christian in verse twenty-four: **"And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."** Our sin was nailed to the cross of Christ, along with the demands and accusations of the Law. We do not have to rely on our obedience to the Law for our salvation, but instead we depend solely on Christ, the crucified and risen one, who set us free from reliance on the Law. But we are not completely rid of our sin, nor will we be until Christ takes us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven. Therefore, the baptized live a life under the cross, of continual dying to

sin and rising with Christ. This life is therefore lived by the Holy Spirit, who gives us the grace and forgiveness we need to be sustained for life in this sinful world. This grace is given through the reading of God's Word, or in hearing the words of absolution spoken by a pastor or partaking of the meal of forgiveness and strengthening, the most holy Supper of Christ's Body and Blood. The life of one called to freedom through the waters of Holy Baptism is therefore nourished throughout by Christ's abundant grace.

Therefore, unlike the rebellious children of Israel, who grumbled against Moses and against God of their desire to return to slavery, we live in the Spirit, sustained by the overflowing grace of God. We have no need to return to the works of the Law, because Christ has fulfilled the Law for us. Therefore, we do good works not out of obligation, but as the overflowing of love and grace that we received from Christ. We will continue to live a life under the cross, a life of daily remembering our Baptism as we die to sin and rise to Christ. Sin will always creep up around us, and Satan will tell us that we are still slaves to sin and the Law. But when he tells us that we can spit in his face and say, 'Get behind me, Satan, CHRIST HAS SET ME FREE!' Amen.