



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Freedom vs. Responsibility

Galatians 5:1

Jeremiah 34:8-22

This is the text for today, Galatians 5:1: **“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.”**

On this Sunday before Memorial Day, there is a story that an American and a North Korean were talking politics. The North Korean was quizzing his friend, trying to understand American freedom. To help explain the concept the American said, “Let me give you an example. In America, I can travel to Washington D.C. and stand in front of the White House and yell at the top of my lungs, ‘Donald Trump is a complete idiot!’” Now to you Democrats out there I don’t want to hear any amens; this is simply a story.

The North Korean pondered this statement by his American friend for a minute and said, “Things are not so different in my country. I to can travel to Pyongyang and stand in front of Kim Jong-un’s palace and shout at the top of my lungs, ‘Donald Trump is a complete idiot!’”

There is nothing political in this story, only an example of the difference between the United States and North Korea. And yes, years ago, I told a similar story when Barak Obama was our President.

Freedom is a wonderful thing, but I wonder how many of us, especially those living in my generation, appreciate our freedom. You see, I was too young for Viet Nam and too old invade Afghanistan. And being born and bred in this nation during a time of relative peace, I believe I am susceptible to taking freedom for granted.

Being reared in the Presbyterian Church and taught about the wonder of God's sovereignty and providence, there is little doubt in my mind that God ordained that we live in this beautiful, grand, majestic country. It is the place where many in the world would like to live.

I don't know who said it but there is wisdom in the words, "Immigration is the greatest form of flattery."

During the summer of 1999, I traveled to Romania with my daughter Amy. The NOROC program was barely a year old. I know much can change in 18 years, but when I was there, it was the dream of most of the Romanian teenagers to visit America.

We invited the daughter of Amy's host family to come to America to visit us; and it practically took an act of congress for her to acquire a visa, because there are so many teenagers who get their visas to come to America who are not willing to return home.

The freedom and greatness of this country draws people from all over the world. And living here all my life, I wonder if I will ever fully appreciate the freedom I have as an American. But there is at least one thing I can do, and that is to give respect -- to remember with thanksgiving the men and women whose blood was spilled on and off battlefields throughout the past 241 years and even before that, to give me the treasure of freedom. Their sacrifice has been for our benefit and I can never repay those whose lives were given for this country.

Pardon the double negative, but I don't know what it is like not to be free. I can only wonder what it was like to sit in the darkness of the slaves' quarters, resting next to an open fire after a back breaking day in the cotton fields, slapping mosquitoes, and hearing the news, "Mr. Lincoln says we're free." Of course, those slaves were not completely free, especially in parts of the south, but what was it like for the first time to be able to leave the plantation? What emotions filled the person who was able for the first time to go where they wanted to go? What was the feeling, knowing that a cruel master, or maybe I should use the word monster, could no longer sell your children to someone else?

Back in late 1980's I served the First Central Presbyterian Church in Abilene. That church has a large Cambodian membership. It started when the church sponsored Ok Dam and his family following the takeover of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge. By the time I moved to Abilene the church had sponsored several families and during my five year of ministry in Abilene these families grew into more families. The result was there were a lot of Cambodians living in Abilene who had become Presbyterians. Ok Dam, the first to move to Abilene, was a Buddhist Priest, but after experiencing God's grace through that congregation, he became a Presbyterian.

In order to better understand the Cambodian community, Dr. Zuefeldt, the senior pastor of the church suggested that I watch the movie "The Killing Fields." It was a difficult movie to watch, but it gives a picture of what life was like for the families who were now part of the Presbyterian Church.

Many of you have probably seen the movie or read the book "The Killing Fields." It is a true story of a New York Times reporter who was working in Cambodia during the awful time of bloodshed.

His closest assistant was a Cambodian who was later captured by the Khmer Rouge. What this Cambodian assistant endured while trying to find freedom is beyond our comprehension. Starving, he survived by sucking blood from a beast in the field. After a time of imprisonment he planned his escape. He ran from one tragic scene to another. Anyone with an education, or anyone who looked like they were educated, was killed. One person who wore glasses was killed, because if he wore glasses he was probably educated. Millions of Cambodians lost their lives.

Finally, having endured the rigors of the jungle while being chased by his captors, he stepped out into a clearing and looked down. To his utter amazement, he saw the Cambodian border. Down below him was a small refugee camp. His eyes caught sight of a hospital and a flag. On the flag was a red cross. There, at long last, hope was awakened! Light returned to his weary face, which said in a dozen different ways, "I'm free, I'm free!" The joys and the delights of his long awaited freedom were his. Ultimately, he made it to America and enjoyed a tearful reunion with his friend.

I cannot begin to imagine this kind of experience; and I wonder if it takes a period of terror or enslavement to actually understand and enjoy the benefits freedom.

Maybe my generation will never completely appreciate our freedom, but no matter, whether or not we have a complete understanding of the wonder of freedom, we must, we absolutely must, understand that with freedom comes responsibility. For freedom without responsibility will only lead back to bondage.

We live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. In our American story we all know that freedom did not come easily. We know that the red in our flag is there to remind us of the blood that was shed for our country. Some may take issue with me, but I believe the greatest tragedy our nation can face today is for a generation of Americans to forget the cost of freedom and the responsibility that comes with freedom.

You have all heard my sad story that my father would not let his kids drive the family car until they had memorized the 107 answers found in the Shorter Catechism. I remember the day I recited number 107 and Daddy gave me the keys to his blue 1968 Mustang. You talk about freedom!

I remember not too long ago I told the children in our church the story of the day when I had the keys, the car, and a paycheck. What was I going to do? I graciously thanked Daddy for the use of his Mustang. I drove it out of the driveway and headed toward Marsh Lane. I turned north toward the LBJ Freeway. I turned right on LBJ and headed to what most of us know today as Valley View Mall, but back then it was only a Sears. I couldn't go to the mall for they didn't exist in Dallas in those days, except for Northpark.

When I turned on the freeway my pulse rate shot up to about 150. And I began to think, "I'll bet this Mustang can do 100. I can get to Sears in half the time it takes my mom. And there is nobody in this car telling me how fast to drive. I'm free." I mean, I was thinking some pretty crazy thoughts, and is there any wonder why insurance is so high for teenage boys?

Do you know what I did? I never broke the speed limit. I was careful with my dad's car. I had the Mustang with a full tank of gas in the context of total

privacy and freedom, but I didn't go crazy. Why? My relationship with my parents was so strong that I couldn't, even though I had a license and nobody was in the car to restrain me. Over a period of time, there had developed a sense of trust, a deep love relationship that held me in restraint.

Now how responsible are we with our freedom? According to my dictionary, "freedom" is "being able to act, move, use etc. without hindrance or restriction, being able of itself to choose or determine freely."

I think my dictionary's definition needs a little adjustment, for without a certain amount of restraint, without being responsible, the choices we make will in the end take away our freedom.

Isn't it ironic that freedom in the purest sense of the word, that is, unrestrained freedom, will only lead to bondage? To be free, or as free as human beings can be, freedom must be restrained by our responsibility.

There is an interesting story in Jeremiah 34. It is the story of the irresponsible use of freedom.

Before I tell the story, I must warn us that the story is about slavery in the Old Testament. And I feel it should be said that slavery in the Bible was much different than slavery in the old South. In the old South one was captured, put in a boat, sailed across the ocean and sold in an inhuman social structure. It was totally unchristian and unjust, and just plain wrong. In Israel one normally became a slave in order to pay off a personal debt, and it was not meant to be a permanent arrangement.

The scene is the besieged city of Jerusalem. All around the city was the army of Nebuchadnezzar, but there was hope. News was spreading that the Egyptians were on the move, and it appeared that Nebuchadnezzar would have to lift the siege of Jerusalem in order to deal with the Egyptians.

Hear now the Word of God:

⁸The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. ⁹Everyone was to free his Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one

was to hold a fellow Jew in bondage. ¹⁰So all the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free.

Set the slaves free, that sounded well and good. Pat the slave owners in the back and give them a big cheer. They were doing the right thing.

Well, maybe their motives were not so pure. For you see, the slave owners freed their slaves for economic reasons rather than holy reasons. Oh, how money and economics tend to run the show.

Think about it for a moment. During a siege of the city, slaves became a liability. They could not work in the fields, yet in Israel the master was still required to feed and care for his slaves. So why not free them and let them fend for themselves, and look righteous in the process?

But what happened when the Babylonians had to lift the siege of Jerusalem in order to fight the Egyptians? The citizens could leave the protective walls of the city and go back to their farms. What do you think human nature would cause them to do? Let's read on:

¹¹But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again.

The slaves could work again work in the fields. The masters could profit from their labor. In a siege slaves are a liability so let's free them and look magnanimous, but with the Babylon army retreating, we need our slaves back on the farm. Let's continue the story are recorded by Jeremiah:

¹²Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, ¹⁴‘Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrew who has sold himself to you. After he has served you six years, you must let him go free.’ Your fathers, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. ¹⁵Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to his countrymen. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. ¹⁶But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you

has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again.

¹⁷“Therefore, this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the LORD—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth.

The people disobeyed. They took back the slaves. As a result, God made the people free to suffer the consequences.

This picture from Jeremiah reinforces the truth that if we are not responsible with our freedom, the choices we make will bring an end to our freedom. In Jerusalem, the people chose not to be responsible. They chose to disobey and it led to their destruction. In the Christian context, by the work of Jesus Christ we have been freed from our sin. But, as I read earlier from Galatians 5:1 that does not mean we are free to do as our sinful nature desires, but we are freed to serve Jesus without restraint. Christian freedom, like American freedom, requires responsibility. How responsible are you as a citizen? And how responsible are you as a Christian?

Back in the mid 1800’s a young Englishman traveled to California in search of gold. After several months of prospecting, he struck it rich. On a trip home, he stopped in New Orleans.

Not long into his visit, he came upon a crowd of people all looking in the same direction. Approaching the crowd, he recognized that they had gathered for a slave auction. Slavery had been outlawed in England for years, so this young man’s curiosity drew him to watch as a person became someone’s property. He heard “Sold!” just as he joined the crowd. A middle-aged man was taken away.

Next a beautiful young woman was pushed up onto the platform and made to walk naked so everyone could see her. The Englishman heard vile jokes and comments that spoke of evil intentions from those around him. Men were laughing as their eyes remained fixed on what they considered a new item for sale.

Within a minute, the bids surpassed what most slaves owners would pay for any woman. But still the bidding continued higher and higher, and it became

apparent that two men in particular wanted her. In between their bids, they laughed about what they were going to do with this young woman, and how the other one would miss out. The Englishman stood silent as anger welled up inside him. Finally, one man bid a price that was beyond the reach of the other. The girl looked down. The auctioneer called out, “Going once! Twice!”

Just before the final call, the English miner yelled out a price that was exactly twice the previous bid. The amount exceeded the worth of any male slave. The crowd laughed, thinking the miner was only joking, wishing he could have the girl himself. The auctioneer motioned to the miner to come and show his money. So he opened one of his bags of gold and the auctioneer shook his head in disbelief as he waved the girl over to him.

The girl walked down the steps of the platform until she was eye-to-eye with the Englishman. She spat in his face and said through clenched teeth, “I know what you want, and I hate you.” The miner, without a word, wiped his face, paid the price, took the girl by the hand, and walked away from the still laughing crowd.

The Englishman looked around town until he found the office of a lawyer. He left the young woman, who had no idea what a lawyer was, outside while he went in for a visit.

When the man returned to the young woman he held out a piece of paper and said, “Here are your manumission papers. You are free.”

The girl would not even look at the miner who just bought her. But he said again. “Here, these are the papers that say you are free. Take them.”

The girl, thinking this was an evil joke said again, “I hate you, and why do you make fun with me?”

“No, listen,” he pleaded. “These are your freedom papers. You are a free person.”

The girl looked at the papers, then looked at him, and looked at the papers again, then said with a huge smile, “You just bought me . . . and now, you’re setting me free?”

We were all slaves, but Christ came to redeem us -- to pay for our freedom. That's why he bought us, to set us free, as Paul told his friends in Galatia, "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has set us free, and be not entangled in the yoke of bondage." Be responsible with your freedom that came at such a high price.