

Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It's a funny thing to preach today. I started to think about what way to take it, and then I saw the Galatians text on freedom and the misuse of freedom. We live in world where technology has been advancing more and more rapidly every decade since about 1900, and technological advances almost always are turned into advances of warfare. So it is, and so is our world.

Think about those bicycle builders. You know, the Wright brothers, who built a flying machine for the adventure and the love of it, and just a very few years later, in World War I, their invention was used first to scout out enemy positions, then to drop a hand grenade or two, and that's not my point. My point is this. An interesting bit of trivia which happened when they first mounted machine guns in the logical place, aimed dead ahead where the pilot was looking in those first airplanes, at least where the pilot ought to be looking. Now, just envision these little bitty airplanes straight ahead, and what's straight ahead? You know what happened? Do you know? Can you see the problem with that arrangement? Straight ahead in those tiny little planes was the one and only place where the one and only propeller was! And they were shooting through it. There was no radio to ground control. They were free. Free as a bird to fly where they wished, to shoot at will, whatever they wanted to shoot at, and at any time felt like shooting, and there were no parachutes, and occasionally they shot off their own propeller. That's the moment in those bad old movies when they looked at the camera, and said, "Uh oh," and went down.

Now later, they created synchronization gears, and they worked as long as they stayed synchronized, but if they got out of sync, if they got out of sync, and the pilot used his own volition and judgment to shoot at whatever he pleased, once again, out of sync, he shot off his own propeller, and went down.

The Apostle Paul says we are free. 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 servants to one another for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now, we've heard that before, but maybe we haven't heard it as a check and a balance against our freedom, against unlimited freedom.

My wife, Caroline, taught in the public school system for several years, and she had a standard lecture she told me about for her middle school kids in Bamberg when they misunderstood unlimited use of freedom. She would say, all right, let's talk about freedom. Am I free to go to my home and throw rocks and break out all my windows? The kids said, yes, that would be stupid, but you can. She said, all right, but I am free to do that stupid thing? They'd say yes, I guess so. She would say, okay, then I'll go to

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your house, and I'll throw rocks, and I'll break out all your windows. They said, no, no, I'd call the law. I'd call the law. Then she would say so my freedom ends when I damage somebody else's property? The kids said yes, you can't go around damaging other people's property. You can't do that! So Caroline concluded her talk, as I understand it, then freedom does have limits.

Paul was saying, you, we, we are no longer our own. We belong to God. You are somebody else's property! In 1 Corinthians 6:20, it says, "You were bought with a price, therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." Don't go around damaging yourself or others. Don't go around in the name of almighty freedom shooting off your own propeller, throwing rocks at your own house. The power to soar free and the earthly home you live in both belong to God.

When you read this Galatians passage more carefully, you'll see that the sins Paul is most concerned about are the selfishness and the hurtful behavior toward others and the harmful behavior toward yourself. The conclusion is serve God with your freedom, after all, you belong to God. You were bought with a price.

Freedom is important. Freedom is worth celebrating, but freedom from what and freedom for what? You know, Paul practically screams at the Galatians, "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters!" When a rabbi, who knows well his history and the enslavement of his people in Egypt, cries out freedom, he knows what he means.

Each year at Passover, Paul would have eaten the meal that centered around the news once we were slaves and now we are free. Stories of freedom were built into his bones. It was after that freedom that God gave the Jewish people that the Ten Commandments were given. They boil down to, you guessed it, love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, to stay really free, you need to stay in sync with God and in sync with your neighbor. If you try to live out of sync with God and neighbor, you'll probably end up shooting off your own propeller and doing really stupid things like breaking the windows out of your own house, harming others or the earthly temple, the body God gave you to live in.

Freedom was not given to break off from God or to break your neighbor in half or to break down your body. That's not what God wants done. Paul did not always understand freedom that way, and we know about Paul when he was called Saul. There was a time in his life when Paul had a twisted understanding of serving God. Paul was ready to kill and to murder. He misunderstood. He thought he was right and righteous. He was captive to a twisted understanding of God and neighbor and self, and then Paul met Jesus.

On a dusty road to Damascus, he met the crucified and risen Christ, and in that meeting with Jesus, hearing His voice, and His call, Paul experienced grace. Grace that truly set him free. It opened his eyes. That's always what Jesus offers us. The grace that sets us

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free. After all, Jesus was the one sent by God to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free.

Scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann, says this of Jesus. Time after time, Jesus led people out of cold, secure oppressions and into the wilderness of freedom. To those enslaved by hunger, He gave the freedom of food, and to the guilt ridden, He announced forgiveness and gave freedom of new life with God. He came to lepers, who had been excommunicated from their families and their friends because of their disease, and He freed them to go back into their communities where all the resources for well-being were stored up. In meeting Jesus and hearing His voice and His call, Paul experienced that kind of freedom. He was free from his zealous desire that brought him such anger and bitterness and hatred that he wanted to kill Christians! That's what he was going to Damascus for! He was free from those terrible and twisted demands of the law that he struggled with all of his life to keep and found that he could not. He was free from his own past sins, his own times of failure, and his times of missing the mark with God. He was free from the fear of death. Once he had been a slave to all of these things, but no more! Now, he was free. And so it was with great passion that he wrote to the Galatians, "For freedom, Christ has set us free!" No longer blind and captive, he saw those whom he had hated as beloved by God, insiders and outsiders beloved by God in Christ. He now knew, and loved God, neighbor, and self, even enemy, and he couldn't imagine going back into slavery, back into selfishness, back into hatred and back into fear. He was now in sync with God and with neighbor. That is the freeing Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul preached. Through Jesus, Paul entered into a new relationship with God, and by the power of the Spirit, Paul began a journey of transformation.

I say began. He entered a life where love and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control were real possibilities for him. Now, Paul was in no way perfect in any of these areas, but he knew that by the power of the Spirit, they could be more real and become more often a part of his life. He was growing, as he said elsewhere, and putting on the mind of Christ. He could stand firm in his freedom. It's what he wanted for the Galatians, to grow in those spiritual attributes, and it's what God wants for every one of us. This is what you are free for! A life where love and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control are real possibilities.

So open your eyes and open your arms and open your hearts to the freedom of God in Christ, and give yourself to the God, who by grace gave Himself to us! Then you will be truly free to love and to forgive as you have been loved and been forgiven. True freedom. Amen.