

“Freedom for Service”
Galatians 5:13-15
March 7, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the gospel-centered life, we are switching gears with this week’s lesson. So far, our study of the gospel-centered life has focused on issues of personal renewal. We need renewal from the inside-out, and God gives it to us in the gospel. As we repent of our sins and learn to trust in the love of God through Jesus, our hearts experience a fresh joy and peace. It would be possible, but mistaken, to conclude our discussion of the gospel-centered life with these issues of personal renewal. As the authors of our material explain, “the gospel is not just the answer to your internal sins, struggles and heart idols. It is also the answer to your failure to love others, engage the culture, and live missionally.” When our lives are centered on the gospel, there is a new power unleashed for mission.

To state this point in theological categories, the faith that brings salvation and personal renewal to our lives also fills us with love for God and others. Even the casual reader of the Bible understands the priority given to our duty to love. Jesus summarized everything God requires of us under this category of love. The first and greatest commandment is to love God and the second to love our neighbor as ourselves. But the Bible, and especially Paul, goes beyond teaching that love is important. He says that love is inevitable. The connection between faith and love is so inevitable that we can work backwards and determine whether we have believed the gospel at all by asking ourselves whether or not we have love in our hearts. There is a shocking verse about this at the end of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. **“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed”** (16:22). The gospel inevitably changes our hearts to love God. In the passage we’re looking at today, Paul teaches that the gospel also inevitably gives us a love for others. He says, **“through love serve one another”** (5:13). Note the following three important truths about this love and the missional lives to which it leads us.

I. The Foundation for Mission - Freedom

Paul draws this important connection between faith and love in the way he talks about freedom in verse 13. This is the second time in this chapter he speaks of freedom. The first time was verse 1 – **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** The context provided by the entire letter helps us to understand this freedom. He is talking about the freedom God has given us through justification. Paul is writing to rebuke the Galatians because they are forgetting

the gospel and returning to the idea that God's attitude toward them depends on their performance rather than the performance of Christ. They were succumbing to the idea that keeping parts of the Old Testament law, specifically the law of circumcision, would give them a leg up with God. Paul answers this with a reminder of gospel truth, summarized in chapter 3. Verse 13 says it well. **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."** The preposition "for" should be understood to mean "instead of." Paul taught that Jesus had become a curse instead of us, as our substitute. Our disobedience to God's law, which is the case with every last one of us, has put us under God's curse. Through Jesus, we have been delivered from that curse when he took it in our place. Jesus has not just died as our substitute, taking the curse we deserved, but he has also lived as our substitute, resulting in the blessing he deserves coming to us. That's what Paul means in 3:14 when he says, **"so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles."** The blessing of Abraham was explained earlier in the chapter: **"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"** (3:6).

Now, Paul says, as a result of these two great exchanges—the curse of sinners upon Jesus and the blessing of Jesus upon sinners—we are free. We are free from the curse of the law because we have died to the law in the death of Jesus. It has no more authority over us, just as if it never existed. Being under the law as lawbreakers is bondage, not because there is anything wrong with the law, but because there is something wrong with us. It is not unlike being in prison, where an inmate is under obligation to the guards and the prison system 24 hours a day and seven days a week. He eats only when they tell him, and he can go only where they have decided to permit him to go. But when he is released and walks out the gates of the prison, he is no longer under that system. In the same way, we are free from the law and its condemnation. Jesus has satisfied its demands for lawbreakers and given us the blessing due him as a law-keeper.

We know we are on the right track with this notion of freedom because of the warning Paul gives. **"Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh"** (v. 13). Our freedom is so extensive that it is possible to abuse it. We are like Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Valjean is a released convict who is given shelter by a bishop. In the middle of the night, he steals some of the church's silver. The police catch him and bring him back to the bishop, who shows him gospel-like love. He tells the police that the silver was a gift to Valjean, and then chastises Valjean before them for forgetting the most valuable pieces, two silver candlestick holders. The bishop then reminds Valjean of his promise, which Valjean has no recollection of making, a promise to use this gift to make an honest man of himself and to help others. With that, the police release him, and he walks away with a bag full of the valuable silver given to him. As he does so, he had the freedom to use it selfishly or lovingly. His life is transformed by the gracious and costly sacrifice of the bishop, and he

ends up using the money to open a factory and to show kindness to many. Our situation is the same. We have been given a gift far more valuable and costly to the giver than Valjean's bag of silver. We are now to use the freedom of the gospel for a purpose opposite of selfish indulgence, which brings us to our next point.

II. The Motive for Mission - Love

Instead of using our freedom for self indulgent purposes, Paul says, **“through love serve one another.”** Paul joins together these two qualities of love and service. There are abundant examples of service without love. When I have need to visit the bank teller, she serves me well, but she doesn't love me. She may remember my name and speak in a friendly voice to me, but I know that her chief motivation for serving my needs is the paycheck she gets every other week. I don't mind this arrangement with my bank teller, but there is one significant limitation associated with it. Service without love has no power to transform our lives. My bank teller cannot change my life in a positive way, no matter how faithfully she serves my needs. It is only as we serve with a heart of love that our mission will be used to transform others.

There are at least three things that love provides for us in our service—motivation, guidance and a reminder of our need for dependence on God. First, love motivates. We will always do what we love, because love lies at the heart of our motives. Bryan Chapell spoke to our church planting network this past Monday, and I'm going to adapt one of his illustrations about this to my own situation. It was the summer of 1980, and Wendy and I had just begun seeing one another on a regular basis while we spent the summer in Philadelphia. As we were beginning to fall in love, she invited me to come up to her aunt and uncle's house in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania for a weekend when her parents would also be visiting. She threw in the proposal that we could stop on the way for a picnic at a state park she knew of. Suffice it to say that I didn't have to be asked twice. Love motivates, and I was motivated.

Paul tells us to serve one another through love because he intends that love be our motivation in serving. What motivates you in your serving of others? There are some alternatives to the motive of love. One that I have seen in my own heart is the motive of doing my duty so that I don't feel guilty. But do you see that at the core of that motivation lies only self-interest. This kind of service is more concerned with me than with those being served. Another motive may be something as simple as doing something to make you feel better about yourself just because you are doing something. It doesn't matter to you if the service you are rendering is actually needed by the person you are attempting to help, but it sure makes you feel good to do something. The book that many in the church are currently reading, *When Helping Hurts*, makes that point persuasively. We may volunteer to help in the kitchen at a homeless shelter

because it feels good to us to do something about such a significant need in our society. Love instructs us, however, that it is not about our needs, but about the needs of those who are the objects of our love. Volunteering in a homeless shelter may be exactly what you should do, but not because it makes you feel good, but because of what love requires. It is the gospel that is able to empower this kind of love, because God has practiced that kind of love toward us through Jesus.

Love not only motivates, but guides as well. It is not always easy to know what to do in loving others. The needs can be so significant that it becomes hard to know where to begin. Love guides us to know how to help. The simple rule of Scripture is helpful in this. **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (v. 13). Mark Stearns is involved in a community development and church planting project in an area of Huntsville called Lincoln Village. I heard him tell once of a man he met who claimed to have been fired by Mother Teresa in Calcutta. The explanation he gave was this. He asked her what he could do to help, and she gave him an assignment. He promptly carried it out and reported back to her the next day for a second assignment. Again, he carried it out fully and diligently and reported back a third day for his next assignment. That was when she gave him the ax, saying that if he could be around the needs of the poor for two days and still not know what to do, he would not make it in that ministry.

Love acts as a guide, helping us know what to do, by giving us the simple question of this well-known quote to love one’s neighbor as oneself. We must ask ourselves, “What would I want done to me in that situation?” This is substitutionary love that is Christlike. Jesus has put himself in our place, and now he asks that we do the same. This kind of love requires that we remember what it feels like to be needy and helpless. As most of you know, Wendy and I had an experience of that this past week, when an early morning attack of something called ischemic colitis caused us to call 911 for an unexpected trip to the hospital for Wendy. The feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and need washed over me as I saw my wife in extreme pain. Those are the times we need to remember in order that we might know how to love others. We simply do for those in need what we would want done for ourselves in similar situations.

The command to love also provides us with a reminder of our need for dependence on God, by the simple fact that we are unable to keep this command of neighbor love without God’s empowering. Loving one’s neighbor as oneself is a far more rigorous command than is often appreciated. If you were without a job, what kind of energy would you be willing to expend in getting another job? That’s the kind of energy we are required to expend for others. When you are hungry, how devoted are you to finding food for yourself? The same devotion is asked of us in this command for the hunger of others. This kind of love is beyond us without God’s empowerment.

III. The Path for Mission – Service

Through love we are to serve one another. Love and service must be joined together. Service without love is belittling and even harmful to the one who is being served. But love without service is hypocritical. So we are called to serve as the outworking of our love. This is a call to take the servant's role, to pick up towel and washbasin as Jesus did when he washed his disciples' feet.

Verse 13 turns upside down our normal thoughts about freedom and slavery. Paul declares the wonderful message of freedom in Christ and then applies it by saying that our freedom is to be used to serve others. We normally think of freedom as doing what we want, and slavery as doing what someone else wants. Paul says that it is just the opposite. The person who is consumed with getting his own way all the time is the one who is enslaved, while the person who voluntarily uses the freedom of the gospel to serve others is the most free. Why would that be the case? The person who wants his own way all the time is simply trying to fill the sense of emptiness in his life by his own plans and purposes. He doesn't have time to serve others because he is too busy pursuing his own career or hobbies. He thinks that a successful career or enjoyable hobbies will fill his emptiness, but they won't.

It is only the person who is free who can truly serve, because she experiences a fullness in the gospel that frees her up for service. Imagine what it would feel like if you could be delivered from the need to be stingy with your time and money, so that you could serve others robustly. Isn't it this stinginess that keeps from serving? It is often so for me. But the gospel delivers from this by removing my need to be stingy. I am stingy because I think that money can fill my emptiness. The gospel says that our fullness comes from Christ, and we don't need to labor to provide it. There is such fullness that it will overflow to others. The idea that you can't out-give God really is true, not as a Get-rich-quick scheme, but as a Don't-need-to-be-rich scheme.

CONCLUSION:

The command of God is clear. **"Through love serve one another."** Satan has always deceived about God's commands. From the very beginning, when he tempted Eve in the Garden, he deceived her into thinking that the path of life commanded by God would lead to her enslavement, and only in the path of rejecting his command could real freedom be found. He lied then, and he continues to lie today. The path of freedom is the one of obedience to God's command to serve one another through love. This path leads to freedom and it springs from the freedom brought to us by our Lord Jesus. What a wonderful God is ours, that he is concerned for our freedom! In knowing him we find ourselves free and alive.