

SUNDAY, JULY 04, 2010

## Sunday, July 4, 2010: Freedom, Not Independence

### Freedom, Not Independence Galatians 5: 1, 13 – 18.

Introduction.

Today is Independence Day, also known as the Fourth of July. This is the official day Americans have set aside to celebrate our Independence from England. The first Americans did not live in an Independent country. They lived in colonies of the British Empire. The first Americans were subjects to the British Monarchy until they declared themselves Independent on July 4, 1776.

The reason we celebrate on July 4 every year is because July 4, 1776 is written across the top of the Declaration of Independence. This was a document which was originally written by Thomas Jefferson and submitted to congress. The congressmen debated and revised Jefferson's document and eventually signed it as a statement to the British Empire that the thirteen colonies would no longer submit to British rule. Some of the congressmen might have signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, but the final signatures did not come until August 2, 1776.

What's interesting to me is how the signing of the Declaration of Independence was neither the beginning nor the end of the American Revolution. The Revolution had begun at least six years before the Declaration of Independence was written and signed. At least that is what all my history teachers told me, when they said that Crispus Attucks was the first person killed in the American Revolution when he was killed on March 5, 1770 in the Boston Massacre.

In the years following the Boston Massacre, the American Colonists revolted against the British Parliament and seized control of the way each colony was governed. Then, they organized their own representative congress in 1775. **In my opinion, July 4, 1776 became the famous date, because it takes at least a year and a half for anything to get accomplished in congress!**

While the fledgling American congress was working on the Declaration of Independence, there was a war raging around them. The British Empire brought the most powerful military on earth to American soil in 1775 to try to disband the American congress and force the colonies into submission. Eventually, this American Revolution became a full-fledged world war. The war did not end until 1783. The war began over a year before the Declaration of Independence was written and signed. The war ended seven years AFTER the Declaration of Independence was signed.

I do not intend to minimize the significance of the Declaration of Independence. It is the foundational document of our country. However, our Independence was not granted simply because it was declared. American Independence did not become a reality until the war ended. Independence was "purchased" by the blood and deaths of those men like Crispus Attucks, who died for their dream of an Independent country.

Independence is a great word to describe the United States of America. We choose our own representative government. We chart our own course as a nation. We alone are responsible for the decisions we make as a nation.

However, Independence is NOT a good word to describe people. The Declaration of Independence does not declare each individual man and woman as Independent. Rather, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights claim that individual men and women are FREE. There is a difference between Freedom and Independence.

Independent may be a good word to describe our nation, but it does not describe individual American citizens...AND, it definitely does not describe individual Christians. Christian men and women should not think of ourselves as independent of other people. We need each other. And, we need to learn how to get along with each other and how to work together to accomplish God's will in our world.

As Americans we enjoy Freedom from Tyranny (or Authoritarian Rule)... Freedom to Vote and select our own leaders...Freedom of Speech...and let's not forget why we are here this morning...Freedom of Religion—the freedom to worship and serve our Creator God in the ways we deem most appropriate.

Yes, we have a lot to be thankful for as we reflect on our Freedom as American citizens.

However, there is an even greater freedom, an even more important reason for us to reflect and give thanks this week. There is only one true Freedom in life. It is the Freedom that comes as a result of a life lived in the Lordship of Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God.

When we speak of our Freedom as American citizens, we often appeal to the documents that founded our great nation: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Did you know there is a document to which we can appeal in order to speak of Christian Freedom? In general terms, I am referring to the Bible. In more specific terms, I am referring to the New Testament book of Galatians.

Paul talks about Freedom more in the book of Galatians than he does anywhere else in the entire New Testament. Freedom was important to Paul in this book because he was writing in response to a controversy over the Jewish Law. Paul had witnessed in the province of Galatia and established a church with the new converts. But later, false teachers began to creep into the new church and teach a false gospel. They taught that a person must do two things to be saved—Believe in Jesus as Lord...AND...Keep all of the Jewish Law...

### **Read Galatians 5: 1, 13 – 18.**

As I read Paul's words, I automatically interpret them as a free American Christian. I think of the Civil Liberties that all American citizens enjoy, and I think of the Freedom that all Christians have through faith in Jesus...Free from the Law.

But how did Paul's original audience interpret these words? How did the men and women of Galatia interpret this reference to Freedom?

The Greek word we usually translate as "freedom" was a strange word in the ancient world. It was typically used within the context of slavery. Slavery was an accepted part of Paul's society. The man or woman who experienced Freedom was the one who lived life at his or her own will. They were not subject to anyone. They made their own decisions. They were not held in bondage to anyone else.

We might call such an understanding of Freedom as a “Social Understanding.” But Paul was not referring to “Social Freedom” here. Paul was introducing the concept of “Religious Freedom” or better, “Christian Freedom.”

This leads me to believe that Paul’s understanding of Christian Freedom is derived from the Social understanding. In other words, the Christian who is free is like the man or woman who has been freed from their previous state of slavery...We were at one time slaves to sin, but through faith in Christ, the sinful human nature has no hold on us...There was a time when we were held captive by the Law, but faith in Christ has broken us free...There are others who are slaves to human death, but through faith in Christ, death has no hold on us.

Since our Freedom as Christians can come ONLY from Christ, it is important for us to define our Christian Freedom by looking at the Freedom demonstrated in the earthly life of Jesus.

We can see this best in the Gospel of John...John gives us some insight into the life of Jesus that Matthew, Mark and Luke just do not show us. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus went about his Father’s business teaching, preaching and healing until the authorities finally catch up to him and crucify him. In John, Jesus was more in control of what he did and what others did to him.

For example, one of John’s recurring themes was that of “Time.” At several points in John’s Gospel, Jesus did not allow the Pharisees and Jewish leaders to capture him because it was not yet “His Time.” In other words, Jesus was free and in control. He was free to teach...Free to preach...Free to heal...And free to give himself over to be crucified. Jesus used his Freedom to accomplish God’s ultimate purpose—he died on the cross and rose again in order that we might believe and be saved.

In fact, John tells us about Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem. More and more people began to inquire about this great teacher and miracle worker. The people crowded around Jesus in hopes of hearing what he had to say and perhaps becoming one of his disciples or followers. When the Pharisees found out about this, they started plotting against Jesus and devising a way they could capture and kill this troublemaker. That is when Jesus finally looked at his disciples and said, “Now my time has come.”

With those words, Jesus entered into a private room with his twelve disciples to share his last supper with them in observance of the Jewish Passover. When the time came for the meal, all thirteen men were tired, worn out and filthy from the dust and dirt of the roads. This is when Jesus surprised everyone...

Jesus stopped each disciple and began to do something that no one would have guessed in a million years. Jesus washed their feet! This was the work of a slave, not the work of the Only Begotten Son of God.

Jesus had the freedom to do anything he could have desired that night. Yet he chose to make himself lower than all others and serve their most basic human need.

This story from the life of Jesus provides us with a PERFECT example of what Paul is teaching us in Galatians 5: 13. All Christians are Free just as Jesus was Free. Therefore, we should use our Christian Freedom the way Jesus did...By serving others.

## **Freedom Is Not License.**

When Paul said, “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature,” he was instructing us that Freedom is not License. To be free does not mean that we have a license to do or say or act any way we want.

The NIV translates “sinful nature” what other versions translate as “the flesh.” If you read the rest of the context, you will see that Paul is describing the Christian life as a choice between a life in “the flesh” and a life in “the Spirit.” This does not mean that each of us has an internal duel between human flesh and human spirit going on in our lives. Rather, Paul is telling us that we have the freedom to choose to please “the flesh”—which is our sinful human nature—or we can please “the Spirit”—which is the Spirit of God who is present in our lives once we accept Jesus Christ as Lord.

In other words, when you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord you received a new kind of Freedom that was not available to you before. Now, you are Free to choose between God’s will for your life and your own will for your life.

The best way I know to say this is to say that True Freedom is the Freedom to choose God’s will over my own sinful human will. True Freedom is not the Freedom to gratify the sinful desires of my heart.

Let me illustrate what I mean...What if I lived any way I wanted to live and said whatever I wanted say and acted any way I wanted to act? Is that Freedom? Of course not! When we continue to live in sin, we are actually living in bondage. We are in bondage to sin—or as Paul says, we are in bondage to our fleshly sinful nature. And living as slaves to sin, we are not free to choose Christ or to live according to the Spirit’s leading.

Freedom is never license, because license is always bondage or slavery to sin. And as long as you are a slave, you cannot be free.

## **Freedom Brings Responsibility.**

In Paul’s understanding of True Freedom, the believer has a choice...Will you choose to follow the desires of the fleshly sinful human nature? Or will you choose to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit?

Either choice you make brings with it eternal consequences. In other words, you are Free to choose, but you are Responsible for the choice you make.

If you choose to use you Freedom to gratify the fleshly sinful human nature, then there are consequences...

God always honors human Freedom to choose. God NEVER forces anyone to do something against his or her wishes. No one has ever been dragged into heaven against their will. God ALWAYS gives us a choice. But God also holds us responsible for the choices we make.

If you choose to use your Freedom to follow sinful human desires, you will exclude yourself from the Kingdom of God.

## **Freedom Has a Purpose.**

Most of the time, when we think about Freedom, we think about personal, individual Freedom. However, it is important for us to remember that there is very little about the Christian life that is intended to be personal and individual.

Beginning with Abraham, we can see that God has called us to a personal and individual covenant relationship with God. But that covenant was not intended for us to be saved and do nothing. No, this was the biggest mistake Israel ever made. They misinterpreted God's covenant love for them as giving them an exclusive relationship with God that no one else had. God intended that relationship to be a witness, a shining example for the entire world to see so that they too might be in covenant relationship with God. And Paul tells us the same thing...

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather (use your freedom) to serve one another in love.

## **Conclusion: Freedom Is Service.**

This is the way Freedom was demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus...Jesus used his Freedom to die on the Cross for all our sins. And Jesus used his Freedom to serve the physical needs of others around him. He calls us to follow his example.

If you follow Jesus as his disciple, then you are Free...How will you use your Freedom? Will you serve your own sinful desires? Will you follow the example of Christ and serve the needs of others around you?