

Galatians 5:13–15

15. The nature of Christian freedom

'Freedom' is a word on everybody's lips today. There are many different forms of it, and many different people advocating it and canvassing it. There are the nationalists who have gained freedom from colonial rule for their countries. There are the economists who believe in free trade, the lifting of tariffs. There are the capitalists who dislike central controls because they hinder free enterprise, and the communists who claim to set the people free from capitalist exploitation. There are the famous four freedoms first set out by President Roosevelt in 1941, when he spoke of 'freedom of speech everywhere, freedom of worship everywhere, freedom from want everywhere and freedom from fear everywhere'.

What sort of freedom is Christian freedom? Primarily, as we saw in the previous chapter, it is a freedom of conscience. According to the Christian gospel we can never be truly free until Jesus Christ has rid us of the burden of our guilt. And Paul tells the Galatians that they had been *called* to this freedom (13). It is equally true of us. Our Christian life did not begin with our decision to follow Christ, but with God's call to us to do so. He took the initiative in his grace while we were still in rebellion and sin. In that state we neither wanted to turn from sin to Christ, nor were we able to. But he came to us and called us to freedom.

Paul knew this from his own experience, for God had 'called' him 'by his grace' (1:15). The Galatians knew it from their experience too, for Paul complained that they were so quickly deserting him who had 'called' them 'in the grace of Christ' (1:6). Every Christian knows it also today. If we are Christians, it is not through any merit of our own, but through the gracious calling of God.

Called to be free! This is what it means to be a Christian, and it is tragic that the average person does not know it. The popular image of Christianity today is not of freedom at all, but of a cruel and restricting oppression. But Christianity is not a bondage; it is a call of grace to freedom. Nor is this the exceptional privilege of a few believers, but rather the common inheritance of all Christians without distinction. That is why Paul adds *brothers and sisters*. Every single Christian has been called by God and called to freedom.

What are the implications of Christian freedom? Does it include freedom from every kind of restraint and restriction? Is Christian freedom another word for anarchy? Paul himself was being criticized for teaching this, and it was an easy attack for his detractors to make. So, having asserted that we have been called to freedom, he immediately sets himself to define the freedom to which we have been called, to clear it of misconceptions and to protect it from irresponsible abuse. In brief, it is freedom from the awful bondage of having to merit the favour of God; it is not freedom from all control.

1. Christian freedom is not freedom to indulge the flesh (5:13)

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. The *flesh* in the language of the apostle Paul is not what clothes our bony skeleton, but our fallen human nature, which we inherited from our parents and they inherited from theirs, and which is twisted with self-centredness and therefore predisposed to sin. We are not to use our Christian freedom to *indulge* this 'flesh'. The Greek word here (*aphormē*) is used in military contexts for a place from which an offensive is launched, a base of operations. It therefore means a vantage point, and so an opportunity or pretext. So our freedom in Christ is not to be used as a pretext for self-indulgence.

Christian freedom is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin. It is an unrestricted freedom of approach to God as his children, not an unrestricted freedom to wallow in our own selfishness. Indeed, such 'freedom', an uncontrolled licence, is not true freedom at all; it is another and more dreadful form of bondage, a slavery to the desires of our fallen nature. So Jesus said to the Jews: 'everyone who sins is a slave to sin' (John 8:34), and Paul described us in our pre-conversion state as 'enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures' (Titus 3:3).

There are many such slaves in our society today. They proclaim their freedom with a loud voice; but in reality they are slaves to their own appetites to which they give free rein, simply because they cannot control them.

Christian freedom is very different. Far from having freedom to indulge the flesh, Christians are said to 'have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (24). That is to say, we have totally rejected the claim of our lower nature to rule over us. In vivid imagery which Paul borrows from Jesus, he says that we have 'crucified' it, nailed it to the cross. Now we seek to walk in the Spirit and are promised, if we do, that we shall 'not gratify the desires of the flesh' (16). Instead the Holy Spirit will cause his fruit to ripen in our lives, culminating in self-control (23). We shall consider these verses in greater detail in the next chapter.

2. Christian freedom is not freedom to exploit my neighbour (5:13b, 15)

Verse 13 ends: *serve one another humbly in love*. Christian freedom is no more freedom to do as I please regardless of the good of my neighbour than it is freedom to do as I please in the indulgence of my flesh. It is freedom to approach God without fear, not freedom to exploit my neighbour without love.

Indeed, so far from being free to ignore, neglect or abuse other people, we are commanded to love them, and through love to serve them. We are not to use them as if they were *things* to serve us; we are to respect them as *persons* and give ourselves to serve them. We are even through love to become each other's 'slaves' (the Greek is *douleuete*), 'not to be one master with a lot of slaves, but each to be one poor slave with a lot of masters',¹ sacrificing our good for theirs, not theirs to ours. Christian freedom is service, not selfishness.

It is a remarkable paradox. For from one point of view Christian freedom is a form of slavery – not slavery to our flesh, but to our neighbour. We are free in relation to God, but slaves in relation to each other.

This is the meaning of love. If we love one another we shall serve one another, and if we serve one another we shall not *bite and devour each other* (15) in malicious talk or action. For biting and devouring are

¹ Neill, p. 60.

destructive, 'conduct more fitting to wild animals',² while love is constructive; it serves. And Paul goes on later (22) to describe some of the marks of love, namely 'forbearance', 'kindness', 'goodness' and 'faithfulness'. Love is patient towards those who aggravate and provoke us. Love thinks kind thoughts and performs good deeds. Love is faithful, dependable, reliable, trustworthy. Further, if we love one another, we shall 'carry each other's burdens' (6:2). For love is never greedy, never grasping. It is always expansive, never possessive. Truly to love somebody is not to possess that person for myself, but to serve that person for him- or herself.

3. Christian freedom is not freedom to disregard the law (5:14)

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' We must notice carefully what the apostle writes. He does not say that if we love one another we can safely *break* the law in the interests of love, but that if we love one another we shall *fulfil* the law, because the whole law is summed up in this one command, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

What is the Christian's relation to the law? It is quite true that Paul says to us, if we are Christians, that we have been set free from the law, that we are no longer under the law and that we must not submit again to the 'yoke of slavery' which is the law (1). But we must be careful to grasp what he means by these expressions. Our Christian freedom from the law which he emphasizes concerns our relationship to God. It means that our acceptance depends not on our obedience to the law's demands, but on faith in Jesus Christ who bore the curse of the law when he died. It certainly does not mean that we are free to disregard or disobey the law.

On the contrary, although we cannot gain acceptance by keeping the law, yet once we have been accepted we shall keep the law out of love for him who has accepted us and has given us his Spirit to enable us to keep it. In the language of the New Testament, although our justification depends not on the law but on Christ crucified, yet our sanctification consists in the fulfilment of the law (cf. Rom. 8:3–4).

Moreover, if we love one another as well as God, we shall find that we do obey his law, because the whole law of God – at least the second half of

² Cole, p. 157.

the law concerning our duty to our neighbour – is fulfilled in this one point: 'Love your neighbour as yourself', and murder, adultery, stealing, covetousness and false witness are all infringements of this law of love. Paul says the same thing in 6:2: 'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'

4. Conclusion

This paragraph is of vital relevance to the contemporary situation in the world and the church, especially regarding the modern rejection of authority. It is concerned with the relationship between freedom, licence, law and love.

It tells us at the outset that we are 'called to be free', with the freedom which is peace with God, the cleansing of our guilty conscience through faith in Christ crucified, the unutterable joy of forgiveness, acceptance, access and sonship, the experience of mercy without merit.

It goes on to describe how this freedom from systems of merit expresses itself in our duty to ourselves, our neighbour and our God. It is freedom not to indulge the flesh, but to control the flesh; freedom not to exploit our neighbour, but to serve our neighbour; freedom not to disregard the law, but to fulfil the law. All who have been truly set free by Jesus Christ express their freedom in these three ways – first in self-control, next in loving service of their neighbour, and third, in obedience to God's law.

This is the freedom with which 'Christ has set us free' (1) and to which we 'were called' (13). We are to stand firm in it, neither slipping back into slavery on the one hand, nor falling into licence on the other.

Galatians 5:16–25

16. The flesh and the Spirit

The main emphasis of the second half of the epistle to the Galatians is that in Christ life is freedom. We were in bondage under the curse or condemnation of the law, but Christ has set us free from it. We were slaves of sin, but now we are God's children.

Yet each time Paul writes about freedom he adds a warning that it can very easily be lost. Some relapse from freedom into bondage (5:1); others turn their freedom into licence (5:13). This was Paul's theme in the last two paragraphs which we have considered. In particular, in verses 13–15, he has emphasized that true Christian freedom expresses itself in self-control, loving service of our neighbour and obedience to the law of God. The question now is: how are these things possible? And the answer is: by the Holy Spirit. He alone can keep us truly free.

This section in which Paul develops this theme is simply full of the Holy Spirit. He is mentioned seven times by name. He is presented as our Sanctifier who alone can oppose and subdue our flesh (16–17), enable us to fulfil the law so that we are delivered from its harsh dominion (18) and cause the fruit of righteousness to grow in our lives (22–23). So the enjoyment of Christian freedom depends on the Holy Spirit. True, it is Christ who sets us free. But without the continuing, directing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit our freedom is bound to degenerate into licence.

The theme of this paragraph may be divided into two and entitled 'The fact of Christian conflict' and 'The way of Christian victory'.