

GALATIANS 5:1, 13-26
FREEDOM!

Freedom! What does the word mean to you? Is it about Mel Gibson delivering a speech to his Scottish army in *Braveheart*, stirring them up to fight for their freedom from the English army? For some, the whole political debate about independence is about freedom from control by the Westminster parliament; you will have your own view. Maybe “freedom” is Sally Challen being released from prison, no longer charged with the murder of the husband who abused and controlled her for years; free now to live her own life, being free in two senses! Her family have been campaigning for a long while to have Sally set free. I have spoken to people who feel as if they have been set free from their past, often from people who have had strong opinions controlling their life. Maybe freedom is an animal that has been in captivity being released back into the wild to fend for itself and to roam widely across the plains of Africa! Freedom for many in our world is the ability to make choices about life that are not controlled by poverty, or by lack of opportunity, but they can choose to do new things because they are rich and are free to choose!

Are there boundaries to our freedom? In the 1960’s, and 70’s society in the West when through a process of kicking off the shackles; we got rid of lots of what was seen then as old morals, restricting people’s behaviour. As a society we kicked off a whole lot of moral values that were seen as old-fashioned and we became free to do as we pleased: we could dress in new ways, sexual morality changed radically, there was music that wanted to influence that change. We became free to do as we pleased, or so it seemed. Francis Schaeffer, a Christian writer at his peak in the 1970’s was debating this whole notion of freedom with someone who advocated the notion of “free love” and so Schaeffer asked him for his girlfriend’s phone number, if love was totally free; needless to say, even for this advocate of “free love” freedom had its limits; he was not prepared to share his girlfriend with anyone!

“It is...” (Galatians 5:1) Slavery was a common practice in the first century Roman Empire; the empire only functioned by slaves; households only functioned by slaves. But slaves were prisoners; they were tied to their masters by shackles, even if invisible shackles; they were owned by their master, they could make no choices for themselves, but had to do as they were controlled by their master. Paul has been making the case that before Jesus came, people were slaves: the Jews were slaves to the Law, the hundreds of rules and regulations that controlled their behaviour, their life, their religion, and brought with it a deep sense of failure because so many people failed to keep so many laws. Guilt was the end-result; “see how I have failed” was the only outcome of trying to live by this law. Or, if they were not Jewish and the law then people were slaves to their sinful nature, with no option but to follow their own selfish instincts and the end-result was badness, and life and society descending into chaos.

Jesus sets us free. We are free from the law in this Old Testament sense; no longer is life, or religion, or behaviour controlled by hundreds of rules and regulations about how to work, what to eat, what to wear, what sacrifices to make; the gospel tells us that no longer are we under the control of the law, but we are free to be the people that Jesus wants us to be, free to be inspired by the Spirit. We are free from guilt: Jesus forgives our sins; forgiveness is the key to the whole gospel. Jesus died to take away sin and we are forgiven because Jesus died. So many of us struggle with grasping this because guilt is so ingrained in our psyche; we have failed, we are failures, how bad are we! Jesus says we are free, forgiven; our sins, our faults, our failings, our mistakes, our shortcomings no longer count against us. We are free from the dictatorship of the sinful nature: no longer do we have to follow our sheer base instincts; there is now another way, the way of the Spirit, showing us a new character, with new qualities, and

a new model for life in Jesus; no longer do we have to be selfish and self-centred because that's the only option, but we have a new choice, to be like Jesus. Jesus sets us free from having to keep hundreds of rules, from being guilty, from our base instincts.

How does that make you feel? Have you ever watched Disney's cartoon version of Aladdin? The genie in the lamp is played by Robin Williams and of course, he is a slave to whoever has the lamp; rub the lamp and the genie has to give you three wishes. He has awesome power, but a teeny-weeny living space! Aladdin promises to use one of his wishes to set the genie free, but the genie is sceptical. In the end Aladdin does set the genie free and to say that he enjoys that sense of freedom is putting it mildly. Would you turn cartwheels at the idea that Jesus sets us free? Do we enjoy that idea of freedom? Of forgiveness? Look at some of the people Jesus met, or that the apostles met and spoke to them about forgiveness, and they went off singing and jumping because they understood what forgiveness meant for them. Freedom is meant to be enjoyed: *"It is..."* (Galatians 5:1) What a huge delight for us in the gospel.

Are there boundaries to our freedom? *"You were..."* (Galatians 5:13) There are two boundaries, one negative, one much more positive. Freedom is to be enjoyed, but it is not a licence to do as we please. Some Christians have said that because God forgives sins, we can do whatever we like because God will forgive us anyway; the more we sin, the more grace we receive from God! Because we are free, there are no limits, no boundaries and so we can indulge ourselves in absolutely anything and some Christians have done that and some continue to do that and throw off any sense of Jesus as Lord of their lives. They claim that we have the licence to do whatever we like because we are free. But freedom is not licence! We are free but there is a boundary; Jesus is Lord and we are His; we cannot simply give in to the dictatorship of the sinful nature all over again and indulge the very desires from which Jesus has set us free in the first place.

The second boundary: *"Serve one..."* (Galatians 5:13) what do relationships look like when there are no boundaries? *"biting and..."* (Galatians 5:15) *"conceited..."* (Galatians 5:26) *"Jealousy, fits of rage"* (Galatians 5:20) and so on. You get the feeling that this was an issue for the Christians in the Galatian churches, that personal relationships were not of the best, but were being destroyed by individual Christians who are just doing what they wanted; there are no boundaries. They were back-biting, talking about each other behind their backs, making snide comments, bullying, maybe even exploiting one another, again perhaps telling each other they were free from constraints. Is this the way for Christians to be, all in the name of freedom?

Here's a boundary: *"Serve..."* (Galatians 5:13) Here's a boundary that comes from the gospel, not a new law to bind us, but a way to live that is good and that follows Jesus. What is the symbol of Christian faith? The cross, a place of service and self-sacrifice! This is the way Jesus went; this is what Jesus was like; this is what Jesus did for us. I have said before that if symbol of Christian faith was not the cross it could well be a basin of water and a towel because Jesus also washed the feet of His disciples, a servant who cared for the needs of others. This is how we are to be, to serve one another; to look out for the welfare of one another, rather than please ourselves. We do this because we are inspired by Jesus; Jesus is our role-model for living; we serve others because that's what He did; there is a boundary to our self-indulgence by loving and caring for others.

We serve one another. Our first thought is not for ourselves and how we can take advantage! Our first thought is for someone else and how can we help, care for, support, one another,

other people. This is a whole different way of thinking for us; it is a whole different way of thinking from the world around us and what we've described before as the "me-generation!" This is a Spirit-inspired way of thinking about life and about ourselves; this is a Spirit-inspired way of life modelled on Jesus; and the challenge for us is to "*Keep in...*" (*Galatians 5:25*)

You are free! You are free to be yourself! You are free to be the person God has made you! You are free from someone else's control! You are free from peer-pressure and trying to please other people! You are free from any sense of duty! You are free from the guilt for your faults and mistakes! You are free from having to satisfy a demanding God! You are free to love and serve the Lord with joy in your hearts; and free to serve one another gladly and joyfully; and free to be the kind of people the Lord wants you to be, inspired and guided by the Spirit. Is this how you see yourself? It is how Jesus sees you! "*It is...*"; "*Do not...*" (*Galatians 5:1,13*)