

Free From / Free For

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One major theme of Paul's letters is freedom.

Paul had come to the church and proclaimed that in Christ the people were free. They no longer needed to adhere to the laws of their Jewish community. Dietary laws. Circumcision. Rituals in the Temple. All of the familiar structures of their old religious life were no longer necessary. Instead, in Christ, they were free.

But Paul is frustrated to learn that his new Christian converts, are resorting back to some of these familiar ritual practices. And so, at the beginning of today's reading, he gets a little heated:

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!"

But I have to say, I don't think Paul should have been surprised. I mean, how do you expect people to react when you come a long one day and tell them that all the rituals that have ordered the lives of their family and their community for generations are simply no longer necessary. But then you don't really offer anything to go in their place?

Imagine if next week someone stood up in this pulpit and really persuaded you that baptism was unnecessary. And then left town. Even if you believe them. Wouldn't you miss it? Don't you think we would probably start doing it again before too long? I mean what's the harm?

That was what this early church was thinking. I know Paul said we don't *have* to follow these laws, but its what all my friends and family do, I don't really want to stick out, I'll just go along.

The Galatians are struggling to embrace Paul's proclaimed freedom from the law because such freedom robs them of familiar social structures and practices. It takes their culture away from them. It Cuts them off from their community.

In this case, Freedom can kind of feel, a bit scary.

And then there was another problem. Some people were taking it to the other extreme. All bets were off. They felt liberated to make life just one big party, centered around themselves, and whatever they felt like doing that day. Paul expresses pretty strong frustration with them too.

So here is the problem with this new freedom in practice. What are we supposed to do? What matters?

Well thankfully, Paul sends this letter to try to correct the record.

And this is what he says:

First, as we already discussed, he says: “do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!” as in don’t go back.

Second, he says: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence.”

Then he give the answer that was missing before... What are we supposed to do?

He says this, “become servants to one another.” “become servants to one another.”

He tells them that in their freedom is not a license to become individualistic, or to build for themselves without regard to others.

Freedom rather is the opportunity to *choose* what we serve, and Paul reminds us the greatest commandment, is to serve our neighbors.

We are set free in Christ, Paul says, not so that we can compete against each other, not so that we can envy one another, not so that we can consume one another, but so that we can serve one another.

So it is not just about what we are free from. It is about what we are free for.

Today our nation celebrates independence. Two hundred and forty five years attempting in each generation to learn to live as free people.

July 4 is the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps the most famous line of this document, the beginning of the second paragraph:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In writing these words, those founders of our nation expressed a vision of freedom. They were in fact undoubtedly influenced by Paul’s writing about freedom, as interpreted by protestant reformers. They understood that each of us has, by virtue of our humanity, a right to be free.

And yet I fear that often our conception of freedom stops there.

When I hear the word freedom used in our public discourse these days, it is almost always a means to say something like: “you can’t tell me what to do.”

I fear that in our life together as a people, we are asserting our freedom too readily as a means to inoculate ourselves against the responsibility that we bear for one another.

We are coming to believe that being free means that we are ultimately only responsible for, and to, ourselves.

And yet, this is how the Declaration of Independence ends. Words that I do not think we know as well...

The last line reads: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

We pledge to each other.

We are a relatively free people, at least in part because of the words and actions of those founders.

And we have seen throughout our history, and in our present, that there are a few tacks you can take with freedom.

You could decline it's opportunity, leaning back onto familiar customs and quietly going along with what ever is going on.

Or you could take it as an opportunity to hedonistically seek after every fleeting pleasure that drifts your way.

Freedom could be for self-indulgence.

Or it could be a chance to bite and devour one another in conceited, self-centered, competition.

Or. Or. We could take our freedom as an opportunity to *choose* to become servants of one another.

I remember as a kid seeing sort of two versions of the Forth of July. One was on TV, it was big, bombastic, and proclaimed a sort of soaring sweeping but fairly abstract notion of America. Slow cross fades between fireworks and waving flags.

The other, was what my town did.

There was a man, a neighbor of ours, who had a house near the parade route. He had a shed in his backyard that he had converted into a kitchen, and once a year on the 4th, he cooked breakfast, pancakes and bacon, for whoever wanted. No charge. Dozens of picnic tables, and I think almost everyone in town stopped by for a bite.

Then there was a parade. And it was filled with hundreds of ordinary people, many of who I knew. Little league coaches, rabbis, librarians, first responders, politicians.

To me, that is the image of freedom that most moves me. Celebrating together all of the ways, big and small, in which we had pledged our lives to each other.

That is the kind of freedom that scripture points us toward.

The kind where we truly can do about anything we want. And we chose to live lives for the sake of others.