

## The Spirit Keeps Us Free

On The Way with Jesus Week 3: Galatians 5:13-26

May 5, 2019

Welcome/intro/vision

A couple of weeks ago on Easter we launched a new series called On the Way with Jesus

We're talking about what kind of a difference doing life on the way with Jesus might make in our everyday lives and how that might look like in our everyday lives

Today we're going to talk about something that Americans love to talk about: freedom. Freedom has been a buzzword really from the founding documents and woven into the DNA of what we're about as a country

There's all kinds of music throughout our history talking about freedom from the our national anthem to pop songs and country songs

We're kind of obsessed with this whole concept—freedom!

Part of what's been so heartbreaking and intense for us as a country is that once we uncork that genie of freedom and the vision and hope of freedom, it's utterly captivating and so figuring out how we can deliver on that promise of freedom to everyone in our country in ways that are fair and equal and just has been and continues to be a long and difficult process

As human beings, there's this thing in all of us that is drawn to the concept of freedom—we all love it!

And so you'd think this would be easy! Here's this one thing that all of us want and we can kind of all agree on! Simple, right?

But we struggle in part because we've got **this conflicted relationship with our understanding of what freedom actually is**

The default definition of freedom in our culture and country is that freedom is, in the words of the great philosopher Mick Jagger: **"free do do what I want any old time"**

I want to suggest that this is the standard default American definition of freedom.

Of course the problem is that our hearts are from time to time utter disasters and what we WANT to do and what's actually good for us are often two very different things

And so while this remains the default understanding and definition of what freedom is, you've got a large percentage of the population who have said, "I used to think that's what freedom was—free to do what I want any old time"

But then I woke up one day and I was 50 pounds over-weight, I had a dozen other health problems, my marriage was a disaster, my kids hated me, and I had no idea what my purpose was here and what I was about in my life

So what I've done is found some **rules that lead to freedom**—go to a book store or look on Amazon and you'll find all kinds of examples of this

**diet/food** rules which can be very helpful and important

**Exercise** rules or systems which can be very helpful and important

**Goals/structures/disciplines in place** rules and principles self-discipline practices to help get your schedule on track or setting good goals which can be very helpful and important

**Professional or business practices** that are very effective and help put discipline in place to help your career or your business to grow

**Religious rules and practices**—all kinds of people who have said that following these religious rules have helped me to find purpose and meaning and given me direction that I didn't have without it

Again, all of these things are good things, great things and we all need people around us who call us to become better versions of ourselves

But do you see these kind of warring understandings of or definitions of freedom in our culture?

Let's call this **the Goldilocks Freedom syndrome**

Because here's what the Scripture is going to say about both of these approaches to trying to find freedom:

**This bed is too soft:** if you actually do whatever you want any old time you end up with a life that's utterly self-absorbed

and as appealing as that is to many of us at some level, God in his mercy has made us such that a life that's a life that's ONLY self-absorbed is actually not satisfying in the end.

a life that's totally and only marked by selfishness is empty—some of us dull that voice, try to muffle that voice, in order to continue to try to live this type of life

But the reality is you were made for something bigger than just you. You living your life for you is too small a life to live. In the end it's meaningless.

And most of us at some point realize that, even if we ignore that emptiness and just try to bury it with more of whatever it is we think we want

On the other hand, if you think ultimate freedom is found in following all of the rules, all of the time for the rest of your life, **this bed is too hard**

Because just like plenty of people have found that doing whatever we want leads us to gluttony and self-absorption and does damage to people around us

So also have plenty of people found that if freedom is always only about following all the rules in just the right way, that can be utterly stifling and exhausting and not always pleasant for others

Some of the most self-righteous people that we know are the ones who are the most disciplined and the best at following whatever set of rules they've decided is the best set to follow because it worked for them

How the rules thing typically works is that only the most self-disciplined can pull it off. The rest of us just feel like we've got this impossible weight hanging over us

For most of us, the rules can INFORM us but they cannot TRANSFORM us. The rules just tell us where we fall short, how much we don't know or don't do

We can never do enough, we can never be consistent enough, whether it's a new diet or new exercise regimen or this whole religion thing

Goldilocks Freedom Syndrome: one bed is too soft, the other is too hard.

It turns out, this isn't just an American problem, it's a human problem. And the passage of Scripture that we're going to look at is going to help us to navigate this problem—to find the way to freedom that is JUST RIGHT

We're going to look at a little part of a letter written by a man named Paul to a brand new little church that he had started in a region called Galatia

And what's happened in this church community is that they're surrounded by a culture that essentially engaging in a freedom that was people doing whatever they wanted any old time

And when they became Christians they knew that they couldn't live like that, they were God's people now and their lives were to be about something bigger than just merely living for themselves

And so a group of people had moved into the church after Paul left them and said if you want to be a Christian, you have to follow the Jewish law first: all the Old Testament rules about circumcision and dietary restrictions around keeping kosher, holy days, all of it

See, Paul had said in order to be a follower of Jesus, it was about UNCONDITIONAL grace, where all you had to do was put your faith in Jesus and then follow him into living a life of faith, hope, and love

But here, these were some other people coming in to tell them that there were all these OTHER CONDITIONAL things you had to do--sort of badges of belonging: following all of the rules

AND this had the added bonus of really clearly steering them away from the broken and selfish behaviors all around them that they knew they weren't supposed to participate in

And so the church in Galatia has landed to the bed that's too hard

they think that there's a system of rules, in this case religious rules, that can get them in good with God, that they have to do in order to get in good with God

AND these rules get them out of the patterns of the people around them that they know aren't life-giving and could maybe get them towards the freedom that they want

So Paul writes a letter to tell them that the rules aren't what Christianity is all about. It's about grace, it's about a life of faith, not a list of rules

and this life of faith that Jesus has come to establish is the way to the real freedom that we all want and were made for

The "Free to do what I want" bed is too soft. The "bunch of rules that I have to follow rabidly," that bed's too hard

So Paul's going to introduce a third way, the way of the Spirit, and that bed is just right—true freedom

Bible/No Bible Galatians 5:13

***13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.***

There it is! That thing that you want and that thing that I want, the thing that we all want, we were called to be free!

Paul is framing this freedom in light of their conversion to Jesus Christ.

When you were called by Jesus into a relationship with him and put our faith in him, that put you on the path to the true freedom you were made for

we are putting our lives in the hands of the man who was sent by God to lead human beings into freedom, God's freedom

But Paul knows that we've got this wonky relationship with freedom that also leads to our wonky relationship with the rules and that this whole thing is out of whack

So he's going to weave his critique of the false freedom of doing whatever we want on the one hand

AND he's going to give a critique of trying to find freedom by following all the rules masterfully all throughout these next few verses

He's going to call the mistake of free to do whatever I want any old time freedom "life in the flesh"—in this context, the flesh means the sin-stained appetites that hijack our lives and promise us freedom but don't deliver

And he's going to call the mistake of trying really hard to follow the rules the law, in this case the Jewish law with all the rules designed to keep people from falling into the flesh but that end up just being another bad replacement for the true freedom Jesus has for us

And remember, this church's main issue is that they've bought into the teaching that following more and more of the law and the rules is what makes them free and acceptable before God  
so Paul is trying to pry them away from their clinging to the law without them over-correcting back over to the too-soft bed of what he calls life in the flesh

***<sup>13</sup> You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. [What's that freedom for and look like?] But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh [freedom ISN'T found in doing whatever you want, any old time, that's a false version and false promises—don't go back to that, they're all on the same page there!]; rather, serve one another humbly in love. <sup>14</sup> For the entire law [remember, they're all about the law, so here's the entire law summed up in one phrase!] is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup> If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.***

Have you ever started out doing a new project around the house at work or jumped into a volunteer situation or a signed up for a cause that you were passionate about  
And everyone STARTED on the same page; y'all started out great and enthusiastic full of energy and totally in lock-step, excited to work with these wonderful people

But then over time you slowly get out of step with each other, small differences start to eat at the unity, there's small squabbles, then slightly bigger squabbles, then murmuring and gossip

And if left unchecked it ends up you're biting and devouring each other, destroying each other's reputation, relationships, and the whole enterprise and the whole project totally gets shipwrecked

This kind of thing happens all the time in all sorts of communities: schools, families, neighborhoods, churches, work places

This is one of Paul's litmus tests of true freedom, Jesus-style, Jesus-infused freedom: if you're really free, it blesses the people around you and doesn't curse them

Real freedom is does not devolve into biting and devouring and destroying one another, real freedom empowers us to love our neighbor as ourselves

And one of the many ways that we know what "free to do whatever I want" isn't real freedom is because it leaves us mostly utterly self-absorbed and very often doing damage to all sorts of people

And one of the reasons why "rules and the law" isn't real freedom is because when that's our primary way of understanding the path to freedom, we can become incredibly self-righteous and judgmental

As a church we've decided that we're going to pitch a great big church tent with Jesus at the center of it all—his life, death, resurrection, relationship and mission is what we're about

And then there's a whole bunch of other STUFF that we're going to work out in relationship and as a community as we're on our way

and we're going to be okay with different opinions about stuff like baptizing babies or adults or end times or whatever else

Because Throughout 2,000 years of history, whenever the church has elevated the rules and the law and all these secondary things alongside Jesus, the result has always been biting, devouring, and destroying each other.

That's what's happening here with the Galatians, it's happened over and over again in churches all throughout history

And Paul says the way that you know if you're on the right path to real freedom

Is that real freedom results in FULFILLING the law by serving one another humbly in love, it's a blessing for the people around us, not a curse to them

Which doesn't mean that they're always going to be excited about it or glad about it or understand it.

But over the long haul, any Jesus-sourced is going to fulfill the great command, that we'll love our neighbors as ourselves, even if at first some of our neighbors don't get it or don't like it

This is a key litmus test to real freedom and what Paul calls the flesh can't deliver on it and what Paul calls the law can't deliver on it, either

So what Paul is going to do next is give us his third option, the better way, the bed that finally is just right for all of us

***<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.***

Ahhh...this bed is just right.

Hey Galatians, you're trying to manage the desires of the flesh through the law and the rules—that's the right problem, I agree with the problem, but you're bringing the wrong solution, the law can't fix that, really, it's just another thing to be enslaved by

Because there's something stronger and better than the law and the rules, there's God's Spirit

The law is static and stiff and like a big piece of granite, a ruler that can tell you where you go wrong but can't transform you to become the kind of person who truly loves what is right.

The Spirit is dynamic, real-time, particular, present, personal, a different kind of energy altogether, which has the power to change us and make us new people

This is the third way that keeps us from falling into the false promises of indulging our flesh

AND it keeps us from falling into the self-righteous, fighting and squabbling of making it all about the law and the rules—Paul unpacks what that looks like next

***<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. [don't just follow more rules but follow more of God's Spirit!] <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. [They've identified that danger, Paul is agreeing with them that the desires of our flesh don't bring us real freedom] <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are [also!] not under the law.***

Sometimes when you step into a new job or a new project or a new challenge, first day or first week, you don't know much about what your options are to solve a problem you're facing

And so of course you do the best that you can, but have you ever looked back much later on decisions you made and realized that you had more and better options than you realized back then?

The Galatians and many of us today think when it comes to freedom there are two options: follow what Paul calls the flesh--doing whatever we want to do at any time

OR find some system of rules that we submit to with as much rigor and passion and commitment as we can muster

Paul here proposes that there's a third way, a much better way than either of those other two options and he calls it walking by the Spirit

And he's going to compare and contrast the results or fruits of life by the flesh versus life lived in or by the Spirit with an additional dig at the consequences that come when we live merely according to the law

***<sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;<sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that **those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*****

Those are some serious consequences; there is no freedom apart from the freedom found in the kingdom of God—freedom is God's property, it's his idea, he invented it

not inheriting the kingdom of God means we don't inherit the land where true freedom is available to everyone

Note that Paul uses the word "LIVE" like this, this isn't about struggling with jealousy or selfish ambition whenever it surfaces

This is abiding in it, choosing it, cultivating it, setting up shop in that behavior—Paul warns that there are consequences that living that kind of life

But here's the results or fruit or outcomes of keeping in step with the Spirit:

***<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. [that my friends, is true freedom that blesses our neighbors. That is the life that we were made for, the communities we were made to build, the families we were made to be a part of and to create. If this was what described you and your life, you'd be one of the most free and awesome people you know!]***

***Against such things there is no law.[note the dig on those who are clinging to the law—you love the law, there's nothing in the law against this great fruit of the Spirit!]<sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. [no freedom there anyway] <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. [which is the result of what happens when we put the rules at the center of it all rather than faith in Christ at the center of it all]***

So Paul describes this whole third way as **“walk by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, living by the Spirit, and walking by the Spirit again!**

That's how we get to real freedom, it's the Spirit that makes and keeps us free, not our own desires, and not the rules or the law

Now of course, the question is what the heck does that mean? If this is the path to real freedom, how do we get there, how do we walk it?

Those other two options are popular in part because they're obvious and intuitive

if true freedom came by me being free to do whatever I want any old time, I know what that looks like

OR if true freedom came by following the right set of rules, I can get my mind around that, at least that's clear and concrete and that's part of why so many people get drawn into heavily rule-based systems of thought, whether it's religious or not religious

Most of us want a code that helps us to figure life out and makes it feel less complicated and less overwhelming—most of us want a formula, 3 easy steps that maps out exactly how to get to freedom, happiness, God, riches, whatever we want

But what if God made us to live by courage and not code? And what if God wants us to live a life of courage in faith, hope, and love and that's the only way to be fully human?

What if code only works at the simplest levels of life—making a fire, cooking a meal, winning a video game, building a house

But what if the things that really matter require us to live by courage, not code?

Like persevering friendships, like extending or asking for forgiveness, like taking new risks and trying new things

like working through the challenges and conflicts that come up in marriage and in parenting and all our relationships that matter?

There's no code for our spiritual journey in our relationship with Jesus, *to follow Jesus took courage for the first disciples when they dropped everything to follow him, it takes courage for you and me to follow him, too*

What if for all the things that matter most, including this third way into real freedom, it's not about a code nor is it about just doing whatever we want whenever we want  
But it's about living a life of faith-filled courage.

This third way call to keep in step with the Spirit as the path to real freedom isn't a code, but it's also not inaccessible or crazy complicated to do. It just takes some intentionality on our part.

And so for today's **Take-WITH** I want to give you a couple of things that you can do to help you **keep in step with the Spirit, this path that leads to true freedom**

**Surrender: prayer;** at a couple key places in my life, I've been in a situation where no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get things moving, couldn't get fix the problem

And at some points I've been praying a prayer in frustration and just telling God that I'm ready to quit and just let him clean this mess up

And a couple times my sense in my spirit has been from God: "it's about time you surrendered to me" in a loving manner.

What if instead of trying until we hit an exhausted and frustrated surrender, what if instead we surrendered at the very beginning

Surrender doesn't mean passivity, it means that all our ambitions, hopes, dreams, plans, desires we submit to a God who loves us

And we're giving that God permission to do whatever he wants to with those ambitions, hopes, plans, dreams, desires

We come to God and surrender whatever it is we're bringing with us in order to have our hand open to receive God's Spirit.

Jesus at one point says that God will give his Holy Spirit to those who ask him for it. So one of my most frequent prayers is for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit for this day, this task, this opportunity, this decision, this challenge

That starts with a surrendered posture. God, I need you and your Spirit to guide me, so I'm going to let go of my agendas and ask you to make me present to what you're up to today

**Scripture: learn and tune** the same Spirit that we're asking God for is the one that filled Jesus, that Jesus shares with us and that Spirit inspired the Scripture that we read.

So the Spirit speaks through Scripture to help us to keep in step with the Spirit, to teach us what that looks like

And the Scriptures are the tuning fork to help us to make sure that we're not just falling in love with the sound of our own voice in our head but actually God's Spirit

Keeping in step with the Spirit means following prompts that are already in the Scriptures as well as attending to more particular prompts in our everyday lives that are always going to resonate with the words of Scripture

Because the same Holy Spirit that's at work in Jesus and in the Scriptures is inviting us into the freedom that Paul talks about here

**Slow:** it is just so easy to barrel through life and bulldoze the Holy Spirit, miss a moment, miss an opportunity, think you've only got two options and neither one leads to real freedom

It takes a beat to sometimes realize that there's more than two bad options and that there's a third way, the way of the Spirit, and that way is freedom

Whatever your normal operating speed is, especially if you're a high rev person like me, see if this week you can take the RPM's down just a half-step IN ORDER TO see if you might be more awake to the Spirit at work all around you

My new year's resolution: to be more present: grace available today, this moment, Sunday, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019: you're here! I'm here! We're in this together! It's beautiful outside! Grace, grace grace, grace grace

Wherever you go, whatever you're doing, at every single moment of your life, God's Spirit got there first

take just a beat internally to be more present and aware, to ask if the Spirit is doing something in that moment that you want to come alive to and be alert to, that you might be able to walk in the path of real freedom

**Serve:** "serve one another humbly in love"

Paul here in this passage says that the path of freedom always includes serving one another humbly in love

If you're looking for a quick start-guide to getting in step with the Spirit, start here. If you're having a hard time hearing the Spirit in Scripture or internally in prayer even as you're slowing down

Then just find someone to serve, and most likely you'll be in step with the Spirit.

Surrender, Scripture, Slow, Serve. That's not a code, it's an invitation into a much larger world where courage is both required and grown as we take small steps

God made you to be free. You want to be free. God wants you to be made free.

In humanity's quest for freedom we've typically fallen into the Goldilocks problem around freedom: too soft, too hard

And so Paul here invites us into a third way, the way that's just right—keeping in step with the Spirit, life in the Spirit, that guides us into the paths of freedom in this life and into the next

All of that available to us as we're all on our way with Jesus.

And it starts right here: communion, the place where Jesus meets us and where we come in order to surrender to his great love...