

The Way of Freedom (Galatians 5:19-26)

One of the realities for some persons released from prison after serving lengthy sentences is their inability to adjust to life outside of prison. After decades of living under the regimentation of confinement, they are incapable of managing liberty. As unpleasant as the loss of freedom is, they had become accustomed to it—obviously having no choice in the matter while confined—but once released, they do not have the frame of mind to adapt to a life without constraint. Without developed skills for self-sufficiency, despite efforts at a gradual re-entry into life outside of prison, they revert to behaviors and attitudes that sent them to prison in the first place, and sadly, some of them wind up back in prison rather quickly. Curiously this is actually a relief for them. At least they know how that life is lived.

This scenario is actually the heart of what Paul tried to convey to Christ followers in Galatia who were being drawn back to their former approach to faith through the influence of legalistic religionists. Some, having never been part of a legalistic faith system were being manipulated into such a system. Whether reverting to previous legalistic practices, or succumbing to persuasive arguments in favor of them, they were squandering the liberty for life they had received in Christ. Which is why Paul was so insistent in reminding them in vs. 13 above: “It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life.” He continued this thought in vs. 16: “My counsel is this: Live freely animated and motivated by God’s Spirit.” His point is two-fold—first, a legalistic approach to faith does nothing to reign in the impulses of sin, meaning, secondly that sin is the confinement from which Christ’s grace has released us. And, reduced to its essence, sin is the state of living from and for self without regard for God’s intention for life and with indifference for how it impacts others.

To drive that point home, Paul reminded them what self-centered life consists of (and, as before, I’m reading from a version of the Bible called *The Message*): “It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.”

Eugene Peterson’s contemporary language translation of this passage from Paul rather shocks our sensibilities, doesn’t it? We’re more inclined to hearing this from the generic vocabulary of the NIV: “sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.” We read this with a sense of detachment—of course we wouldn’t be caught dead involved in any of this. But Peterson’s translation strips away the veneer of detachment to show the guts of selfish living, and it’s not a pretty picture. Granted, I don’t believe Paul had in mind that all of these always coalesce in every life, and perhaps not to the degree Paul suggests, but the point remains that stripped of whatever level of spin we apply, this is the unvarnished truth of a life centered in self. What’s particularly troubling about this is how normalized these behaviors have become in our culture; that we’re operating on the premise that we’re all self-directed individuals exchanging our personal commodities for temporary relief from an all consuming ache for wholeness that eludes us causing us to believe that this is the way life is whether we like it or not. On top of this, it’s frightening to consider that some of what Paul described creeps back into the lives of Christ followers, perhaps imperceptibly at first, but as the result of our inherited behaviors that lend themselves as appropriate under certain circumstances or within particular contexts. A life centered in self can have an insidious hold on us that flares up when triggered leading to surprise followed by shame. Is it any wonder that we ourselves are tempted towards a legalistic approach to faith in an attempt to curb these latent impulses?

Paul doesn’t leave us hopeless or helpless. He went on to say: “But what happens when we live God’s way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears

in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.” What Paul described is life in the way of Jesus—we can trace the evidence of this in the life of Jesus as we read through descriptions of him in the gospel accounts. And this character of life is what the Spirit of Christ, alive in you, brings to you. As a follower of Jesus, you have the ability to live in precisely these ways—the capability is already within you and it becomes your default way of life, your normal way of life as you remain centered in Christ.

This is the key element we sometimes miss.

You see, friends, we don’t produce these life-ways in our own strength. It’s not about us coercing our own behavior in the moment. We can wind up terribly frustrated when we try to force ourselves to have patience—what Peterson described as a willingness to stick with things, or kindness—what Peterson described as a sense of compassion in the heart. We find ourselves conflicted when we wrestle against the impulse to self-satisfaction in the face of what we know to be God’s desire for the moment. If that is commonplace to us, it means that our energies are being expended in the wrong direction. Our efforts aren’t meant to be directed towards developing these characteristics—they are to be directed to remaining close to the One from whom we receive our life. Focus on nearness to Christ—know Christ, desire him, pursue his heart—emulate his focus on living in the conscious presence of God—that God’s life and Spirit enfold you in every moment, and that God’s power—the ability of living life in agreement with God’s purpose and desire—is always present to you.

Bear in mind that this is a process of transformation that is ongoing within you. This shaping of your inner character to match that of Jesus is the goal of Christ’s Spirit at work in you, but it also depends upon your openness to that work. And this is the where our efforts apply—to be present to the Spirit, to invite the Spirit’s work, to learn the voice of the Spirit leading your thought, to engage in a conversational relationship with the Spirit. This is what is meant by living in the center of Christ—it’s when we intentionally and consciously focus our attention to the dynamic presence of Christ who, by His Spirit, lives in us attending with us to the details of our life’s moments guiding us to assess all of our moments against the backdrop of God’s desire being released through us to convey blessing, value, and redemptive compassion as our primary impulse. But again, it is a process that takes place over time as we invest time with God. Don’t be discouraged—be reminded that grace has already dealt with your failures, that God’s love isn’t qualified by performance, and that your ability isn’t the issue so much as your availability to God. You see, God can improve your skills, but God cannot force your will. That’s the opposite of love, which God is and cannot be any other way. This isn’t about our ascending to God through meritorious works—it is about God descending to us with gifts that reveal God’s life and heart bringing to us in our present state the wholeness for which we long.

When we’ve settled into this, we’re able to hear the rest of Paul’s thought: “Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.” Do you sense the prospects of this? Don’t you find this intriguing? You are an original! This is God’s invitation for you to become all that God envisions you are. What might that be? I’ve no idea what God has in mind for you, but it’s also not my place to make that determination. Think rather of the possibilities unleashed by what the limitless, boundless, eternal God has in mind for you! Friends, believe it when I say that God has faith in you! God has invested in you! God’s love has been poured out over you—God’s Spirit resides within you transforming you and leading you into a future for which you are the exact right fit and your delight in it is the delight God enjoys anticipating you there. God is not interested in you being like anyone else—God is solely interested in you being the original God created you to be. You portray and convey God’s life in a way unique to you—no-one else in all of creation can

express God in the way you do by God's personal design. What could be more interesting than living into the fullness of God's desire for you? By so doing, you will find yourself, like God, investing your life into others so that you become a vessel of God's blessing, and you will experience meaning and satisfaction in your life as the expression of God's life running wild in creation displaying God's glory. That, my friends, is freedom—don't settle for anything less.
AMEN