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A Short Sermon Series on Galatians Part IV: Freedom Road

(Galatians 5:1, 13-25) 1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.... 13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

So, are you tired of Paul yet? Well, if so, I understand. For while his writing is sometimes soaring and beautiful, it's also often very complex and very dense. But whether soaring or slogging through his writings, one thing you can say about Paul is that he is **always earnest** -- very, very **earnest**. And just like those always-serious and earnest acquaintances that each of us has in our lives, and whom we enjoy in *small* doses, that is the key isn't it? -- *small doses*. Now, earnestness is often appropriate, and yet it can also be tiring. One person I know in fact one said of reading Paul "He just makes me tired."

So, it's probably a good idea that this month's sustained look at Paul ends with

this fourth week and this fourth look at the Book of Galatians. Because it **IS** hard to sustain such earnestness for very long, and our minds can start to wander or glaze over. So, before that happens, let's conclude our series with Paul's summation of what he has to say to the Galatian churches, and see what it can teach us. If you were here previously in this series, you'll recall that the initial question that Paul is dealing with is whether or not those who want to become Christians must first become Jews? That is, must they first commit themselves to keeping the ancient Jewish food and other laws and must the males be circumcised? Paul argues that, no, the unconditional love of God offered through Christ is for everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Moreover, the Jews came to know the graciousness of God precisely through the fact that God had given them the law to protect and tutor them, and Christians have now come to know that very same graciousness through Jesus. So Paul is contending that it is wrong to put any conditions on those would confess Christ, for that risks keeping them from knowing of God's unconditional love. Put another way, those who might wish to claim Christ could become Jews first if they wish, but that is not **required**.

In our final passage for today, Paul now broadens his argument and tells the Galatians -- and us -- that **whenever** we have a choice in the way that we are to go, we should always take what we might call the freedom road. He spells this out with two different lists of personal characteristics. The first list he calls "*the works of the flesh*" and includes "*fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.*" Wow. Talk about yet another earnest moment! That's a pretty depressing list, isn't it? (Although one pastor that I know of was in a bible study group

for ministers and as they moved around the circle reading aloud, the minister who got the last verse read it this way: "...drunkenness, carousing, and things like these,' ... 'Sounds good to me!'"¹ But that is the kind of dark humor that recognizes that all of us are capable of finding attractive behavior which we shouldn't. But then there is that other list, what Paul labels "the fruits of the Spirit": "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*"² It's still a pretty earnest list isn't it?!? And what is your reaction upon hearing it? Maybe you're like me, and your first reaction upon hearing such a list is: "*well, count me out; I can never achieve those things.*" But such a reaction is not too far from despair, is it? And that is a terrible way to have to get up every morning, wondering if you can live up to what God expects or even demands of you.

But neither reaction -- *either* despair at how much you think you sometimes fit that list of sins *or* despair as to whether you can possibly live up to what Paul says are the things that are the fruits of the spirit -- is what Paul would want us to have. Why do I say that? Well, what I think Paul is getting at here is a distinction that is very important for us to keep in mind. It's a simple one, one that you've undoubtedly heard before, but it's crucial here. When Paul talks about freedom he has in mind two kinds of freedom: **freedom-from** and **freedom-for**. Both, says Paul, are necessary for fulfilling Christian faith. How so?

Well, there have been lots of folks down through history who fastened onto the gospel, the good news, as being only about our having been given freedom-**from**. But even in Paul's day, that sort of attitude gave the Corinthian church a terrible problem.

¹<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/SL628.html>

Paul had to write repeatedly to this church to tell them that their freedom in Christ didn't mean that all rules were gone. Freedom-**from** didn't mean permission to do whatever you want, whatever feels good. But there were those in the Corinthian church who thought it did: and so they did things like make sure they got to the fellowship dinners early so they got all the good food before the working folks were able to get there, there were those who thought that they could interrupt the worship service by speaking in tongues and that their freedom to do so trumped everything else.

Or consider this story from much more recently. During one of evangelist Billy Graham's early crusades in Los Angeles, there was one person there who also misinterpreted this whole freedom-from thing. Apparently, a well known gangster was invited by a friend who had experienced conversion to come to the crusade. The mobster actually responded to an invitation to receive Christ. Later that evening, the new convert attended a gathering which included some of the key leaders in the Billy Graham organization. When asked what he was going to do with his life, the new convert said, "*I guess I'll be a **Christian** gangster [now].*" His assumption was that he could simply continue with business as usual and append "Christian" to his occupation like the other folks did.² He too missed the point about the freedom-from that the Gospel offers; it is not just the absence of all rules, it is not permission to do whatever you want, and it is not immunity from behaving poorly.

Well, what about freedom-**for**? All by itself can also be a trap. If the risk of only seeing freedom-**from** is a life that is lived with no restraints, the risk of only seeing

² Story adapted from <http://www.lectionarysermons.com/SL628.html> Emphasis mine.

freedom as freedom-**for** is a lived that ends up being, paradoxically, a life which is immobilized and stuck. What do I mean? Well, those who would revel in their freedom-**for**, their ability to choose anything, to be anything, to have whatever they want will find, sooner or later, that the finitude and mortality and limitedness of life stares them in the face. It is possible, often for a very long time, to have the *illusion* that you are completely free to create yourself as you want, to create your own reality, to start over with something new if this or that choice doesn't work out. But one day, if you haven't already, you will realize that there are just some choices, some freedom-**for**'s, that are no longer possible. They just aren't. And that can lead to feeling simply immobilized, stuck, trapped, or inadequate. It is an illusion that you and I always have the freedom-**for** choosing anything we want. So many of my baby boomer contemporaries were told from day one that they could do anything, be anything, and that their freedom for choosing was unlimited that some of them have simply been unable to ever settle down to travel down one road and instead have flitted from choice to choice to choice, never feeling settled, never feeling fulfilled, always thinking that there is another choice out there that could be better. And that too is a way of being stuck and immobilized.

So Paul is suggesting that the most fulfilling life of Christian faith will always seek to *hold together* both freedom-**from** and freedom-**for**. But how do we do that? Well, look again at those two lists that Paul offers in our scripture for today. There is that list of things that *hurt* your life and *hurt* your life in community: jealousy, anger, quarrels, and so on. And there is that list of things which *enhance* your life and the life of those around you: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, and so on. I

suspect if each of us are honest, there is a trait on that first list -- or a trait like it -- that sometimes calls to you, tempts you, wants to own you. Am I right? And, at the same God has given every one of us some extra ability, extra talent, for one of those things on that life-**enhancing** list. How do you nurture the latter and stave off the former? How do you use the freedom **from** thinking you must earn God's love as the freedom-**for** living an even better life for your own sake and the sake of those with whom you are in relationship? Well, let me tell you an old Native American parable that speaks to just this question:

One evening an old Cherokee gazed at his grandson and recognized that the boy had a battle going on inside himself. He said, "My son, your battle is between two wolves. One is evil: Anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed." ³

The one you feed. My friends, as we finish up this journey with Paul and as he invites us to follow him down freedom road, it is a fitting question to ask: which traits do **you** feed? Do you find yourself feeding a sense of insecurity? Do you find yourself feeding old resentments or hurts or even hates? Then I would invite you to do two things: first, pray to God that you might feed those bad wolves less. It doesn't mean not acknowledging those thoughts and those attitudes, but it does mean asking God to strengthen you not to feed them and give them more power than they ought to have

³ I was sent this story several years ago by a friend. I do not know a citation for it. If anyone reading does, I'd be pleased to know it.

over your life. And, secondly, when you are tempted to feed one of those wolves that appear on Paul's first list, talk about it: with friends, family, church, pastors. Sometimes the very thing you need to stop feeding a trait that hurts you is for someone you trust to help strengthen you to starve that evil wolf until he weakens and fades away..

Instead of feeding the evil wolf, vow each day to do something to feed that good wolf. And then do it. It doesn't have to be a giant thing. It can be a small thing, for from small things can come mighty consequences. Feed that good wolf by being more diligent in serious Bible study, asking questions where you need to always aiming towards being one who would know more of love or joy or peace or patience or gentleness. Feed that good wolf by being as generous and gentle with yourself as you are with others. Feed that good wolf by making time -- or more time -- each day for prayer -- and pray for those who are hurting and needy, and pray for those that you haven't understood. Feed that good wolf by giving it a steady diet of trying very hard to always assume the best about other people. Those are just a few of the things that can make that good wolf grow strong. And God through Jesus Christ -- the one who sets you free-from and free-for -- will bless you more than you can imagine.