

## **Introduction**

A couple months back, Todd and Jovelyn Clemins took a trip to Argentina. As you may know, Todd has a keen interest in railway and train travel. He and Jovelyn rode a number of trains while they were away. And of course we remember receiving the news that one of the trains they were on derailed and got off track. I have seen the pictures. It is amazing there were as few serious injuries as there were. Upon their return, Todd stood right here giving glory to God for preserving his and Jovelyn's lives.

The train provides a graphic and helpful image related to freedom. Off the tracks a train presents anything but the idea of freedom. Off yhr tracks, it cannot go anywhere or so anything. But a train is most free when it is riding smoothly on the rails specifically designed for its wheels. I will come back to this image as we proceed through today's text. It is one in which Paul labors to explain the nature and purpose of freedom. Like the freedom of a train, spiritual freedom is not the absence of restraint and direction but the presence of both for the sake of fulfilling God's designed purpose for us.

[Read text and Pray]

Our study of Galatians 5:13-15 marks an important turning point in Paul's address to the folks he had won to Christ there in this Roman province. To this spot in his letter, he has set forth his case against the false gospel being promulgated by the Judaizers. He defended his apostleship and the message he preached. He explained the theology of justification by faith and how dependence on works eliminates justification altogether. He has explained the purpose of the mosaic law and how believers in Christ are set free from it. From there he turned to exhort the Galatians to abandon any dependence on law keeping as contributing anything to obtaining right standing with God. He pleads with them to stand firm in their freedom in Christ and not to go back. Finally, Paul expresses his confidence that the Galatians would be steadfast to his view and reject the false teachers.

Whenever one has made a strong argument, as Paul has done thus far, one always wants to guard against over correction. Whenever arguments are assembled to assault a false view, it is possible that the result could be that folks move from one false extreme to another. That is over correction.

When the problem of legalism (righteousness by works) is targeted with the principle of freedom, someone might logically, though wrongly, move to the conclusion that works don't matter, that obedience doesn't matter, that anything goes. What's most at risk is that folks stop taking sin seriously and cast off all restraint. So at this point Paul maneuvers to protect against an over correction resulting in this error. The concern has to do with a misunderstanding of freedom. Paul's main point in this text is that freedom is NOT the ABSENCE of order and constraint. Rather, freedom has a purpose of its own with a distinct pursuit. Here is how Paul protects against over correction. First, he reiterates that the Christian's calling has a purpose—that we are called to be free, but then he clarifies the purpose of that freedom. This is our outline this morning. We will look first at the purpose of our calling and then at the purpose of our freedom.

In verse 13, Paul reiterates ...

### **I. The Purpose of Our Calling.**

"For you were called to freedom, brothers." This statement nicely sums up Paul's message to the Galatians to this point. You were not called to bondage, to enslavement, or to imprisonment. As Paul said in chapter 5 verse 1, "For freedom Christ has set us free."

By the use of the word calling, Paul directs attention to conversion. When a person is awakened to his desperate sinful condition and hears in his heart a summons to turn from sin and trust in Jesus Christ, he is experiencing a divine call to salvation. And if he responds in faith, it is because God is working the effectual call. Calling is the means by which God brings sinners to himself unto salvation—a new birth, the forgiveness of sins, justification by faith, reconciliation with God, etc. in Romans 8, Paul explains that those whom God foreknew and predestined, he also CALLED.

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you have been called. Now there are a number of purposes in this calling. We just mentioned a list of them. Here Paul highlights the specific purpose of freedom. If you are among the called, you have been called to freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free. Captives are released. Restraint and impediments have been removed. The shackles have burst apart. Prison doors have been opened. We are redeemed from the curse of the law. The burden of sin and guilt and shame has been removed. The yoke of enslavement to the mosaic law has been taken off our backs. The called are set free!!

All of these aspects of freedom call for loud celebration and rejoicing. But there needs to be further clarification lest there be misunderstanding. If we are free NOT to carry out the mosaic law, if we are free NOT to have to be circumcised, free NOT to celebrate the feasts, free NOT to have to carry sacrifices to the temple, then ARE we FREE to do just anything? Are we free not to care how we live? Is there a purpose to this freedom? Or is it just a freedom to be random and ruled by the whim of the moment? All of these questions help us see why Paul is compelled to say what he says here in these verses. So let's move on to ...

### **II. The Purpose for Our Freedom**

Spiritual freedom is not an end in itself. It is clear from Paul's instruction here that freedom has a divine purpose that stretches beyond the freedom itself. Freedom is a means to an end. Some possible uses of freedom are not what God intended and are therefore prohibited whilst other uses of freedom are according to God's divine design and fulfill his purpose. Generally speaking there are but two uses of freedom, one of which is corrupt and forbidden and the other commendable and commanded.

A. The Purpose of our freedom is NOT fleshly indulgence. Paul delivers this crucial warning. "Only do NOT use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh."

I can just hear the skeptic responding to the public reading of this letter from Paul. He says, "Now wait a minute! In one instant you are telling me I am free and now you are telling me I am not free." You say I am free but you say I can't use my freedom to do what I want. That's not freedom! You say I don't have to keep the law, but I can't live in opposition to it either. What kind of freedom is that?"

What Paul is saying here in this text provides a reply to such reasoning. If you are free but you must not think that you can use your freedom to indulge in fleshly selfishness, then such indulgence must

not be the essence of freedom. And it is not. The flesh is an enemy of freedom. That is because it impedes you from doing what you were meant to do.

Here is where we return to the image of the train. Trains are designed to run on the rails. As long as they are on the rails, they are free to go. They accomplish what they were designed for.

Indulging in the flesh, however, is like a derailed train. A derailed train is not free to go anywhere or do anything. Derailments are destructive. That is exactly what fleshly indulgence is as well. Indulging the flesh does not set one free to accomplish one's purpose and fulfill one's greatest joy.

It is the opposite of the message that is preached by our culture. To our world, indulgence is the essence of freedom. We get this message preached to us every single day by the false prophets of the world. And increasingly the world is buying it. Crime itself is a fleshly indulgence and this generation wants to rid itself of law enforcement and consequences for crimes. Why? Increase freedom for fleshly indulgence! But we can all see that freedom is not the result. It is not freedom for the victim and it is not freedom for the perpetrator either. I mean these are crazy times! They are marked by anything but true freedom. People are enslaved to their lusts, their perversions, their self-loathing, and they all want to be affirmed in their enslavements.

We ourselves can become enslaved by flaunting our freedom. We might declare our freedom to involve ourselves in certain activities which at the very least may carry us to the edge of indulgence and soon we might well have indulged in sin. Citing their freedom in Christ, Christians might watch movies that end up having negative consequences in their thinking, but they sit there waving the freedom flag. Some partake of alcohol claiming they are free in Christ but soon step over the line into drunkenness. Some may smoke marijuana because they are free. There have been those who defend viewing pornography because they are free. Beware of citing your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. You are deluded. What you are calling freedom is no freedom at all. It is slavery to the flesh. It does not enable you to accomplish what your divine designer intends for you and it does not ultimately fulfill. It is a derailment.

My grandson Titus enjoys the stories of Thomas the train. I have read countless of these stories to him. He will look through the Thomas story book and pick out the one he wants. It does not matter that he has heard it five times before. He delights in hearing about these trains doing their work on the island of Sodor. Lots of derailments and lots of rescues as these trains on Sodor look out for one another. It is one of our jobs in the body of the church to help keep one another from becoming derailed through poor and wrongful uses of our freedom. It is also our responsibility to respond to brothers and sisters who become derailed and get them back on track. We must regularly remind one another that freedom in Christ is not defined as freedom to selfishly indulge the flesh. The flesh is an enemy to true freedom. Indulgence is a spiritual derailment.

And the results of a derailment are catastrophic. Look what Paul says in verse 15. "But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another." The flesh is not yours or anyone else's friend. It does not want what is good for you. It wants your destruction. And it wants to tear others apart as well. When you let fleshly indulgence get the upper hand, it will take you down and injure others along with you. That's what James tells us by way of a question. He asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have so you commit murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. ... friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:1-4).

B. The purpose of our freedom is not fleshly indulgence. Rather the purpose of our freedom is love. It is not to tear each other apart through selfish fleshly indulgence but to bless each other through serving one another in love. Paul says, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, BUT through LOVE, SERVE one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The purpose of our freedom in Christ is love. Love is the rails and serving one another is the direction of true freedom. Freedom is not simply the lack of restraint. That is a derailed train. But a free train is moving upon the rails and in the direction of the tracks. Freedom is not when people are being torn down but when they are being built up. It is wrong to equate freedom with the absence of power over you. Freedom is the absence of DESTRUCTIVE POWER over you. If you are enabled to do that which builds you and others up, then you are on God's track and you are free indeed. You are NOT free when you are dead and dying. You ARE free when you are alive and living for the glory of God and the well-being of others. You are NOT free when you are following the prince of the power of the air. You ARE free when you are following the prince of peace.

You are following the prince of peace when you are using your freedom to serve others through love. Loving one another is the fulfillment of the law. Paul cites the second great commandment. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This was the goal of the law as it relates from one person to another. It is interesting now that Paul speaks NOT of KEEPING the law but of FULFILLING the law. To keep it is to obey its commands. To fulfill it is to live out its purpose. When we give ourselves over to the flesh, we are failing to do what is good for each other and we fail to fulfill God's purpose for us. But when we serve one another through love, we fulfill God's purpose for us. And guess what. .... That is when we are truly free. We are truly free when we are unencumbered from restraint that would keep us from doing what we were created for. We are truly free when we are free to fulfill the purpose for which God created us. God created us for love—to love him and be loved by him and to love one another. When we are doing that, we are free. We are on the rails and moving forward.

So one might ask, has Paul forgotten that we are free from law keeping? Because now he is bringing up the law? No. He has not forgotten. These are two different things. We are not keeping laws in order to be right with God. Rather because we are free, we by the power of the Spirit are enabled to fulfill the purpose of the law in terms of love for one's neighbor. We are living out a life of love by the power of the Spirit. Love does not ignore the moral standards of the law or act in opposition to them, but it does more than simply obey them. Christ is the model here. According to Galatians 2:20, out of love for his people, he gave himself for his people. And when we do the same, it is not keeping the law—doing it to be accepted with God. It is fulfilling the law—completing the purpose for which it was given by the power of the Spirit who has written God's law upon the hearts of his people.

So what is the nature of this love? It looks outward. The flesh looks inward—what do I want? What do I need? What will make me happy? What will make me feel good? Love looks at others and asks, what do they need? What will help them? What will draw them closer to the Lord? How can I serve them and edify them in a way that suits the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Home is where we often indulge in the flesh. We focus on ourselves. But if we through love serve one another at home, how will that look? It will look like a husband who asks himself, "How can I serve my wife and make her stronger in the Lord?" It will look like a wife who asks herself, "How can I support and affirm my husband so that he is strengthened in the Spirit?"

Church is another place sadly, that we often indulge in the flesh in this way—we are always wondering why nobody is serving me but we are not serving others. For the enjoyment of our freedom in Christ, we should rather ask ourselves, “How can I serve others in this body? What am I doing to lift and build others up? Am I coming to meetings mainly to receive or to give? What can I do with my life that will contribute to others being more mature in Christ?” At the conclusion of the chapter on this text, Tom Schreiner makes a good point. He writes, “If you are saying to yourself, ‘That doesn’t sound like freedom but slavery,’ then you don’t know what true freedom is. You are still enslaved to your own selfish desires” (338).

Who do you really think about more—yourself or others. Love does what Jesus did. He considered others more important than himself. And for that reason he gave himself to serve rather than be served. In this way he gave his life a ransom for others.

### **Conclusion**

Melissa and I are making some initial plans to take her dad on the trip of a lifetime later this year. The main thing we will be doing is riding trains through the alps of Switzerland. One of those that I especially want to take is called the Gornergrat Bahn. It is almost six miles of line that ascends upward over dramatic bridges, through galleries and tunnels, across forests, and past rocky ravines and mountain lakes. And at the summit is a breathtaking view of the Matterhorn. They say that the panorama is among the finest in the world. But getting there involves a vertical climb of about a mile. That is going UP! But not to fear! This is a cog railway. There is a toothed central rail between the bearing rails that engages with a cogwheel under the train which provides traction. It enables the train to climb this very steep slope and prevents it from running away from itself on the way down. This train is most free when it is most steadfastly gripped by the rails upon which it runs.

And you and I most greatly enjoy the freedom for which Christ set us free by being steadfast in our grip of the will of God for our lives. It is not law-keeping, but the love with which we are to live is the fulfillment of the purpose of the law of God and it flows out not to lay hold of eternal life but it flows out because we have eternal life and the Spirit of God himself produces this work in those who through faith are united with Christ.