**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday November 4, 2018**

**“Free to Love and to Serve Others” (Galatians 5:13-18)**

**1. Introduction: *Anything Goes***

In 1934, American composer and songwriter, Cole Porter, wrote a song entitled *Anything Goes.* Since that time many performers have recorded this timeless classic. The most recent interpretation of this song was by Tony Bennet and Lady Gaga in 2014. But my absolute favorite version is the one that Ella Fitzgerald recorded in 1956. I heartily encourage you to listen to her version of the song, on CD or online. I guarantee that you’ll absolutely love her rendition. This song is timeless in the sense that it articulates the anxieties of every generation as significant cultural shifts threaten to pull the rug from right under their feet. For a song that was written in 1934, it still expresses our fears about our changing world. Now, I won’t sing it for you, but I will read out the lyrics.

“Times have changed   
And we've often rewound the clock   
Since the Puritans got a shock   
When they landed on Plymouth Rock.   
If today   
Any shock they should try to stem   
'Stead of landing on Plymouth Rock,   
Plymouth Rock would land on them.

In olden days, a glimpse of stocking   
Was looked on as something shocking.   
But now, heaven knows,   
Anything goes.   
Good authors too who once knew better words   
Now only use four-letter words   
Writing prose.   
Anything goes.

The world has gone mad today   
And good's bad today,   
And black's white today,   
And day's night today,

We might feel that in our current world, *anything goes.*  And it’s true that “in olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking” and now that level of modesty is absent. In movies, books and the media, better words have given way to four-letter words. We might feel like things are getting worse, but this song expressed these same sentiments in 1934. So, it seems that every generation when faced with significant societal changes thinks that *anything goes.*

Paul’s readers in Galatia were faced with a similar prospect. As Gentiles they came to faith in Christ from a religious world where *anything goes.* Certainly, there were cultural norms and societal rules that they abided by, but their pagan religion did not give them clear direction on personal morality. Philosophy was the realm of ethics. To remedy this ethical deficiency, the pro-law rival preachers proposed that these Gentile Christians should adopt the Mosaic law as a moral guide for the Christian life. They argued that if these Gentile Christians followed the law, then they would belong to and remain within the Christian community. Paul perceived a grave danger with this line of argumentation because it suggested that Christ’s sacrifice was not enough to make people right with God; they needed to add the Mosaic law to make themselves acceptable to God. This of course would take the focus of the gospel from what God had done for us to what we can do for God. In addition, it suggested that following the law was the antidote to human sinfulness, a notion that Paul had already emphatically refuted (2:21; 3:21-25). In response to the Judaizers’ preaching, Paul declares that Christians are *free* from the demands of the Old Testament law. They are no longer *under the law* but are *living by faith.* But this, the Judaizers would argue, leads to the crucial question - if the Mosaic law is out of the picture, does that mean that *anything goes*?

**2. Free to Serve Others**

Earlier in the letter when Paul began his argument for *justification by faith*, he hinted that the problem of morality and his law-free gospel was an important issue. After stating that “no one will ever be justified by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16), Paul imagines his rivals’ response and states, “*But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!*” (Galatians 2:17). The argument that the law-free gospel encourages human sin would continue to dog Paul’s ministry throughout his career. For instance, in Romans, one of his last letters, Paul argues that the law, instead of reducing sin, increased it (Romans 5:20). He went on to say, “But where sin increased, *grace* abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). To guard this statement from misunderstanding, he immediately poses a rhetorical question, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Romans 6:1-2). For Paul, the experience of God’s grace could never be a licence to sin because the Christian has been freed from sin to live in newness of life (Romans 6:22).

In response to the charge that the law-free gospel fosters sin, Paul emphatically states that it leads to a better way - *a life directed by love, service to others and the Spirit*. But before he gets to ethics, Paul reiterates the believers’ identity in Christ. “For *you have been called to live in freedom*, my brothers and sisters,” he declares, “But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Again, *being* flows into *doing*; *Christian indicative* leads to *Christian imperative.* The call of God to every believer is to live a free live, which has been brought about by Christ himself. But this freedom should never lead to a life of self-indulgence. Instead, it should result in a life of sacrificial service that is inspired by love for others. Our freedom from the law should never produce a lifestyle where *anything goes.*

At the same time, the Mosaic law clearly established a set of do’s and don’ts for God’s people, so in this new era of freedom initiated by Christ, what regulates human behavior? First, Paul stresses that our freedom from the law does not mean that we can do whatever we please or, in his words, that we use our freedom as an opportunity to indulge our *sinful natur*e (Galatians 5:13). The *sinful nature* is humanity’s fallen and corrupt nature, as distinguished from the human nature original created by God. It represents the total effect of sin upon human beings. While the impact of sin upon human beings is multifaceted and profound, this passage suggests that it leads to an exclusive focus upon the self. When the self is at the centre, we become greedy and unwilling to share our resources; we get angry at the driver who cuts into *our* lane of traffic; we become addicted to our own pleasures and comforts; we defiantly do our own thing because God is only trying to control *our* lives; we close ourselves off from others because we need our own personal space. Society’s definition of freedom includes such catch phrases as “freedom to be yourself” or “doing your own thing.” But when we march to those slogans we elevate the self above everything, above others, even above God himself. This is when *freedom* becomes warped into an opportunity to satisfy the sinful nature.

Eugene Peterson writes that sin deceptively pretends to lead us to freedom, but it “violates the reality of freedom that has its source in the love of God and flows outward toward the love of another. In place of deeply organic connectedness there is arrogant defiance of God and ruthless disregard for persons” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 154). He goes on to state, “The one act in which we can engage that avoids, on the one hand, straitjacketing freedom, and, on the other hand, goading freedom into anarchy, is the act of *love*” (p. 154).

The Christian, then, has a choice – to use his or her freedom for self-indulgence or to serve God and others. True Christian freedom expresses itself through love in service to others. After warning us about the twisted pathway of freedom, Paul affirms the true path of freedom, “*But through love become slaves to one another*” (Galatians 5:13). It seems like a great paradox: God sets us free so that we can become slaves! But this wonderful paradox is the pathway that frees from our sinful self-centredness. As we become slaves to one another, we imitate Jesus, who did not selfishly cling to his divine prerogatives, but emptied himself and became a *slave* for the sake of humanity (Philippians 2:6-7). When we put others first and look out for their needs, we become imitators of Christ. Peterson, quoting Schlier, writes, “It is not in isolation but in life with others that the Christian attains to freedom” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 152).

This quote makes me think of one of my favourite movies (and it’s Anya’s favourite too!). *About a Boy* is a quirky comedy starring Hugh Grant as an emotionally stunted man-child named Will who happily lives his life without any meaningful connections to people. Surrounded by his CD’s, his TV, and his cappuccino machine, he considers himself an *island,* proudly defying the famous truism that, “no man is an island.” He typically enters into superficial and short-term relationships with women only to have a little fun. All of this changes when, against his better judgment, he becomes a friend and father figure to an eccentric young boy named Marcus. As Will becomes a friend to Marcus, he begins to care about Marcus and the many challenges he faces at home and at school. Caring for others is a new and different experience for the self-centred Will and it leads to an interesting set of events in his life. At one point Will remarks, “Once you open your door to one person anyone can come in.” At the movie’s conclusion, this is exactly what has happened – instead of spending another Christmas alone in his apartment, he is hosting Christmas dinner surrounded by friends. Amidst the celebration, he thinks to himself, “Every man is an island. I stand by that. But clearly some men are *island chains*. Underneath, they are *connected*...”

“*Once you open your door to one person anyone can come in*.” Like the character in this movie we can keep our door closed, live in isolation and be focused on our own needs *or* we can open up our door to someone who’s hurting and needs our help. Empowered by God’s love, we can learn to serve others. The alternative is a sad existence where we see others as a threat or a means to an end. Consumed by our selfish needs we can become like wild animals, biting and devouring others (Galatians 5:15) instead of caring for them.

**3. Conclusion: *Free to be directed by the Spirit***

But we can’t love and serve others in our own strength. You can’t “love your neighbour as yourself,” which fulfills the real purpose of God’s law, through human effort alone. For Paul the Christian life is wholly determined by the presence and activity of the Spirit” (Longenecker, *Galatians,* p. 238). On the heels of his exhortation to serve others through love, Paul writes, “So I say, *walk by the Spirit*, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). The work of God’s Spirit in our lives counters the pull of the self-centered, self-indulgent desires of the sinful nature. The presence and activity of the Spirit enables us to rise above our focus on the self so that we can be more loving, more giving, and more humble people.

This transformation, however, is not instantaneous; although many of us wish it was! The Holy Spirit sensitizes us to what is contrary to God’s will, so we know when we’re not living for God, yet we often desire an instant solution to the problem. Walking in the Spirit, however, is a continuous, ongoing and life-long process; there is no quick and easy approach to the Christian life. We’re painfully aware of these two polarities that are at odds with each other – “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:17). And we’re also aware of the impact that this conflict has upon us – “for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want” (Galatians 5:17). So, what’s the answer to this dilemma? Following a set of rules and regulations designed to regulate our behaviour? Or simply giving up and giving in to our sinful self-interest, as Oscar Wilde suggested when he wrote, “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it” (*The Picture of Dorian Grey*) ?

Paul’s solution to the human condition rises above both these options – “Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness” (Galatians 5:16, *The Message*). Paul’s words here indicate that living by the Spirit has both *active* and *passive* aspects. We are to *walk* *in the Spirit*, which entails deliberate, purposeful activity on our part (Galatians 5:16). At the same time, we are to be *led by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:18), which suggests that we voluntarily subject our will to the Spirit who leads us. This wonderful balance reminds us that life in the Spirit is not merely a passive act of sitting back and letting the Spirit do his work. We are to take deliberate steps to follow the Spirit’s leading. At the same time, we are not in complete control of the situation for we must yield our lives to the Spirit. Because of this, we can never take credit for our spiritual accomplishments because they are all due to the gracious activity of the Spirit in our lives.

You, my brothers and sisters, are called to be *free*. But as Christian philosopher, Jacques Ellul once wrote, “Freedom without love resembles a blind man without a guide” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 154). As we are guided and empowered by God’s Spirit, let us use our freedom in Christ to love and to serve others.