

Pako Morning Service: 24/04/2016

Scripture Reading: 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:13-18; Sermon: "Freed to love"

Congregation, I remember when the Iraq war was on and the allied forces liberated the people of Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein there was initially great rejoicing in the streets. People were finally free from this particularly cruel dictator. However, it soon became apparent that this new found freedom resulted in people looting and doing things that were just terrible.

Now we understand that every one wants to be free. We love freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. And some of these things are great to have and even fight for. However, as far as a Christian freedom goes, we have to be on our guard, for Christian freedom does not mean we're free to do whatever we want and when we want.

In the book of Galatians, Paul has been speaking about being set free from slavery to the law to the wonderful freedom we have in Christ. But what are we to do with this freedom that has been won for us by Christ's death and resurrection?

Well, I think there are two dangers that we need to be aware of as Christians. One is that we may tend to slip back into legalism, thinking that what Christ has done for us is too good to be true and that we should perhaps do something ourselves. That was basically the problem with the Judaizers who wanted to add circumcision to the work of Christ. But we know that's a no go area. Paul actually warns against that in the beginning of chapter 5. **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery"** (Gal. 5:1).

The other danger is that we think this wonderful freedom gives us license to do what we would like to do. But our freedom in Christ doesn't give us license to do what we like or even to become immoral. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the love of Christ constrains us. It prevents us from become lawless! Our freedom gained for us by Christ allows our faith to express itself in love. How can we not love after having been first loved by Christ!

Today's text picks up the theme of love and presses it home with various warnings and commands. The first warning, call it a negative, appears in verse 13. **"... But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature."** (Gal. 5:13). When Paul speaks of the sinful nature, he is speaking about the whole person, not just the physical body. There is a part of us, call it the old self, that doesn't want what God wants for us, and that is our sinful nature coming to the fore which is still inclined to sin.

But as Christians saved by Christ, we now need to resist that inclination. We must not give opportunity for the sinful flesh to indulge in sinful activity. Our liberation from legalism must not become an excuse for satisfying our sinful desires. The truth is that anyone who uses freedom to indulge the flesh in sinful living is not really free at all. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (Jn 8:34).

In other words, license is the very opposite of the freedom Christ has won for us. To think that you can indulge in whatever you like because of what Jesus has done for you, is really a form of slavery for it will never satisfy. Real freedom comes when we understand that Christ frees us from sin, but not to sin even more. Paul writes to the Roman church, **"Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin!"** (Rom 6:1-2a). So that that's the negative, do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.

Positively, the freedom we have in Christ sets us free to serve one another in love (v13). To serve another in love is to enjoy real freedom. It's a little ironic, isn't it? Initially we were in bondage, slaves if you like to the demands of the law. Now, says Paul, we have been set free, to be slaves, or if you like, servants to one another in love and that is regarded as freedom.

Just as Jesus came to serve us and become our servant by suffering and dying for our sins on the cross, we are now called to the same kind of voluntary enslavement. The freedom we have in Christ obligates us to serve one another in love. So the freedom we have received in Christ is not to sin but to serve. It is not license to indulge our sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in self-renouncing love.

And by the way, it isn't an option, but a command. It can involve many things. It may be helping those who are stumbling, comforting the afflicted; encouraging the weak; It may mean helping the neighbour in whatever way one can; obeying the law, honouring our parents, showing patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The second positive of being free comes in v14, “The entire law is summed up in a single command, **“Love your neighbour as yourself.”**”

So here is the logic thus far. We are free in Christ to serve one another in love. And if you do this, then you will fulfill the whole law, namely to love your neighbour as yourself. This law of love is familiar. Jesus summarised the law in Matthew 22:34-40; We read it earlier. Is there a better way to prove that we love God than by the way we love our neighbour? Loving our neighbour is the very heart of God’s commandment; love fulfills his law.

Now, please don’t say this is just a new form of legalism, for it isn’t. The law of God is good and has to be kept in its place. The law is useful in many ways. It drives us to Christ by showing that we cannot justify ourselves before God by keeping the law. It restrains sin in us and in our society. Paul said he would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, “Do not covet!” The law also shows us how to live God-honouring lives, namely instructing us how to love God and our neighbour. Again not as a means of getting right with God, but as a way of living free.

Our freedom is not lawlessness. Yes, we are no longer under the law, yet our desire remains to fulfill it. The law is now our guide and the pattern by which we live. The law no longer hangs over our head as punishment if we don’t fulfill it, but as a road map to live God-honouring lives. Some Christians would like to throw out the law, but that would be a big mistake. God has never done away with his law. His basic commands have not changed. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). God still wants us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and by doing so to fulfill his law.

However, and there is another negative which appears in v15. **“If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.”** The opposite of not serving and loving one another, is biting and devouring. We don’t even know what the Galatian church was bickering about, but the language indicates they were fighting like cats and dogs. They were acting like a pack of wild animals. Their behaviour was beastly. Perhaps some thought they were now better Christians because they were circumcised.

Perhaps others thought that since they weren’t circumcised that they were the better Christians. Whatever the Galatians were arguing about, Paul was worried that all the bickering would end up splitting the church. When Christians think their freedom in Christ gives them a license to do what they like, when they like and how they like, it may turn out to be a license to kill.

In fact, there is a command here, “Watch out” or you will be destroyed by each other. Paul knew that conflict in the church is a kind of spiritual suicide. Such conflict is always self-destructive. It means the death of Christian witness and fellowship and throughout history we have seen more than enough it. John Calvin comments, “How unhappy, how mad it is, that we who are members of the same body should voluntarily conspire together for mutual destruction.” May we all say with Paul, “Watch out, lest we destroy each other!”

Now I don’t know about you, but if you take these commands and warnings seriously, you soon realize that it is so contrary to our nature. In fact, it almost feels like it is impossible to do. When I get up in the morning, I am not necessarily thinking about your needs in the same way I am thinking about my own. Let’s be honest, caring for others as I care about myself is hard work. In fact, it is beyond my power to do it.

Well the secret to being able to do it is learning to live by the Holy Spirit. In v16 Paul says, **“Live or walk by the Holy Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”** (v16). If the Christian life looks too hard, remember, that you are not called upon to live it in your own strength. We must live it by the Spirit of God. The command to serve and love another is not a new form of legalism, rather it happens freely when we walk and are led by the Spirit.

In fact, there is no other way to do it. If you try to do it in our own strength, you will only be doing it from your emptiness. The only way to serve and love one another and be free from sinful fleshly desire is to be led and sanctified by God’s Holy Spirit. To be a slave to one another in love, and to love each other as we love ourselves is not always easy, but the good news is that it is primarily God’s work through through the power of his Holy Spirit within us.

When we are controlled by the Holy Spirit we will avoid becoming legalistic or licentious for that matter. And if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us we will no longer follow through on our sinful desires. The promise in verse 16 is actually emphatic: **“You will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”** I am sure you have all heard of the prayer, “Lord, I have been pretty good up until now, but I am about to get out of bed, so please help me!”

We may chuckle at that prayer, but it isn't as silly as it sounds. What a great prayer to pray at the beginning of each new day. This prayer is actually asking the Holy Spirit to lead us and to continue his work of sanctification in our lives. Surely, being saved by Christ creates within us to be more Christ like. We desire to become more holy in thought, word, and deed and live in and enjoy the freedom we have received; that's what we pray for! And as someone once said, "It's pretty difficult to sin when one is earnestly in prayer."

Now with all this talk of freedom and serving and loving one another, and being led by the Holy Spirit, it would be easy to think that the Christian life is one spiritual triumph after another. Yet the reality is that Christians often suffer bitter spiritual defeats. We still sin. We do not always want to serve and love and hence we fail to fulfill the law of God's love. Martin Luther faced the same dilemma. There were times when he committed very fleshly sins. This made him worry that he was not really a Christian. Perhaps you have had some doubts of your own.

Well before you despair, note v17, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." Martin Luther used this verse to preach to himself. Luther realised that he would never be completely without sin, because he was still in the body of flesh.

It's the same with us! The very thing we want to do we find we don't do and the very thing we don't want to do is what we do. It's a constant battle for all of us. The Holy Spirit pulls us one way and the sinful flesh another. The spiritual battle between flesh and Spirit takes place within the Christian. Martin Luther said that the Christian is "partly righteous and partly sinner" (simul justus et peccator).

Verse 17 helps us to recognize that the spiritual life will always be a struggle. How can it be otherwise, when our flesh desires what is contrary to God's Spirit? So do not be surprised by sin, as if you expect God to make you perfect in this life. Nor should your remaining sin cause you to doubt your salvation. On the contrary, we are most aware of our sin when the Holy Spirit is most active in fighting against our old adversary, sinful desire.

And be encouraged, that the war will not last forever. We are not fighting a losing battle. Nor will the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit end in a stalemate. One day the Spirit will gain total victory, and the flesh will torment us no longer. Then we will be free in all the ways that the Spirit wants to make us free. Free from sin, free to serve, and free to love one another and hence fulfill God's law. We will be free to do what we most want to do, which is what God wants us to do.

Three days after the allies liberated the city of Bagdad, they had to send in their military police to re-establish order and stop the lawlessness. Thankfully, we have no need of that, because we are not under the law, but are being led by the Spirit. We gladly follow God's marching orders. Congregation, we have been freed to serve and love one another. Please allow the Holy Spirit to lead you more and more, for then you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Amen.