

## “Free to Serve”

### Galatians 5:13-15

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Do you remember the first time you tasted freedom? I do and it tasted a lot like chess pie. I was about ten years old when my mother made a chess pie and put it on the counter to cool. She left the house to run an errand which meant I was all alone with that warm pie. I promptly sat down and started eating and did not stop until half of it was gone.

Most of you know how rich chess pie is. I do now. I had never been that sick in my life. I realized that day it really is possible to bless yourself to death, or at least get very close to it. Twenty years passed before I could even look at another chess pie, much less eat a bite.

Freedom comes with a lot of risks, doesn't it? There is always the danger that we will abuse or misuse freedom and disappoint ourselves and others.

In spite of this, **God wants us to be free.** The fifth chapter of Galatians has often been labeled the “Magna Charta of Christian Freedom.” Oppressive legalism prompted Paul to emphasize the freedom of the gospel. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge sinful nature; rather serve one another in love” Galatians 5:1, 13.

I'm not surprised that God wants us to be free. He loves us too much to withhold freedom. John Buchanan writes in a recent article in *The Christian Century* that the finest thing that love can do is give the gift of freedom. “It is not without pain or risk,” Buchanan writes, “but love lets go, backs away and allows a beloved child the freedom necessary for authentic personhood, with all the risks that entails.”

Every parent that has taken a child to college or a military recruiter can attest to this. Parents are not abandoning their child when they do so, but expressing love in its finest form.

**Why does God want us to be free?** Is it so we can live a life with no boundaries, restrictions or accountability? You know the answer to that. God never condones irresponsibility. However, He wants us to be free so that we can be ready at all times to help others that are struggling.

Just as God was in Jesus in powerful ways meeting needs, He wants to be in us. For this to happen, we must be as unencumbered as Jesus was, free from the things that would keep us from being His agent of blessing.

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge sinful nature; rather serve one another in love.”

Do you sense the irony in this verse? Paul writes about freedom and service in the same sentence.

Most of us would never connect these two ideas. We talk about freedom in terms of rights and privileges, not duties and responsibilities. For most of us, freedom means the ability to roam with no restrictions, going where we want, when we want, doing what we want. Freedom means being out of debt and having the resources to be independent. It is synonymous with retirement, relaxation, pleasure and self-indulgence.

This was not so for Paul. Freedom for practically-minded Paul had an emphasis on the communal nature of life. Freedom meant that he was prepared and ready to help others when they needed his help. He was free to serve his fellowman, not free to indulge, free to exploit, free to ignore, free to roam aimlessly, free to insulate himself from others' pain or free to forget about the negative consequences of a selfish lifestyle. No, he was free to “serve others in love” because he was not in bondage to anything that would keep him from doing so, including selfishness,

greed, jealousy, envy, fear, guilt, bitterness, addictions, an unhealthy attitude, an uncontrollable ego or the lust for power, possessions or pleasures.

**Why did Paul view freedom in Christ as a means to “serve others in love” rather than “blessing himself to death?”** Had he never tasted a chess pie? Was he not tempted to be self-indulgent? Sure he was. He was tempted just as we are. However, he believed as a friend of mine has written, “that through the lens of the gospel, we are not free unless we are devoted to the agenda of the God whose work is liberation, and that translates into service.” Paul, like Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the modern Civil Rights Movement, believed that no one was free if anyone was still in bondage. He would use his freedom to secure theirs.

Can you imagine how excited Paul would be to live in a country like ours with all the resources, opportunities and freedom he would have to “serve others in love?” The possibilities for service would be limited only by his imagination.

I have no doubt that Paul would be one of former President Bush’s “Thousand Points of Light.” He would have resonated with John Kennedy’s call, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” and joined the Peace Corps. He would be the chairman of our Missions Committee encouraging all of us to fulfill our church’s dream to “give ourselves away,” showing us where and how we could do it.

Paul doesn’t live here, but we do, and it is up to us to take advantage of the opportunities God has given us to make the world better. This will require that we broaden our concept of freedom to include others, their well being and fullness of life. It means we must be convinced that God can use us, just as He did Jesus, to bring His presence to others so they, too, can experience healing and restoration.

This is why I challenge you to use your freedom, especially as an American, as the means by which you can “serve others in love.” Ask God to liberate you from anything that would keep you from seeing the plight of others and helping them.

By the way, what would that be? What keeps you from seeing or helping those in bondage? Until you grapple with this, you are not as free as you thought you were and certainly not as free as you could be.

A couple of days ago I saw an interview with Warren Buffet’s three children. Last Monday, Mr. Buffet announced that he was giving his vast fortune to charity, thirty-seven billion dollars. The interviewer asked his children how they felt about their dad giving away their inheritance. All three said they were comfortable with this and even a part of the decision. In essence they said that all his life their dad had taught them to be responsible and generous. He never wanted them to be controlled by selfishness and greed. More importantly, they learned from him that helping others was the key that unlocks the door leading to true freedom.

Have you learned this lesson? Are you modeling and teaching it to your children? For your sake and theirs, I hope so, and so does a world in need of hope and healing.