

What does **freedom** look like

26 June 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

We usually take **freedom** for granted ... freedom to choose what we will eat for dinner, who we will eat with, whether we will come to church on Sunday morning, how we will spend the rest of our day today.

In many parts of the world, people do not enjoy such freedoms.



Many asylum seekers took the courageous step of seeking freedom and hope for the future when they set out on the long and dangerous journey to Australia ...

- seeking freedom from persecution due to their race or religion (e.g. Hazara Afghans,

Kurds in Iran)

- seeking freedom from civil war, famine or hunger (e.g. people from South Sudan, Sri Lanka)
- seeking freedom from imposed religious and social morality (e.g. gay men in Muslim countries)

The reality for these people turned out to be vastly different to what they hoped or imagined ... they escaped persecution or war or famine in their home country only to be locked up as prisoners from day one of their arrival at Christmas Island.



They have been treated as criminals, not granted visas, watched and oppressed every minute of every day for ten years. When you speak with people in immigration detention their greatest desire is for **freedom**!

This morning we'll be thinking about the sort of freedom that **Christ** brings us.

[Galatians 5:1-6, 13-25](#)

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.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. ...

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

[Luke 9:51, 57-62](#)

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

Jesus said to another man, 'Follow me.' But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE

What does **freedom** look like ... if you are a citizen of Ukraine, a person – usually female – caught up in domestic violence, or a person trapped by the dreams and unrealistic aspirations of advertising?



The **promise of freedom** has been an intoxicating political slogan for many revolutions and uprisings through history – from the Exodus of the Israelites in Egypt to the French, Russian or Chinese revolutions to those who live in Afghanistan, Sudan, Burma or Ukraine

today – whether promising freedom to working class people or farmers or women.

But what does **lack of freedom** look like?

We all had a taste of it during Melbourne's extended covid lockdowns of the last two years. It meant ...



- no travel overseas, interstate or into rural parts of Victoria
- at times it meant going no further than 5 km from where you live
- a nightly curfew with no going out at night after 8 pm
- work and education to be done from home
- no visiting people in aged care or hospitals
- very limited reasons for going outside your front door at all
- and later, the legal requirement to have proof of vaccination to work or to enter shops and so forth

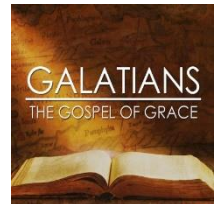
These measures were all designed to stop the spread of covid and most people complied with these measures ... which mostly achieved the desired public health outcomes. But ... they were very difficult for many people who felt their freedoms were cut off and who felt very isolated and anxious.

Some people so resented their **loss of freedom** that they defied the covid restrictions and protested in large numbers. This lingering resentment probably helped the election of a United Australia Party Senate candidate for Victoria at the recent election.



What we've seen so far is that freedom is a **fundamental right to be fought for** although sometimes there are **other issues** such as public health **that are even more important.**

When Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia he was worried by another aspect of freedom that was being distorted. Paul had preached the gospel to these people and taught that we can enjoy right relationship with God based on God's **grace** and **what Jesus has done for us**. We receive all this – and the gift of God's Spirit – **through faith** – not through what we have done or achieved by following some law.



Full stop. End of story.

But then another group of Jewish Christians had – in Paul's words from earlier in the letter – *infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves (Gal 2:4)*. It all sounds a bit like a mystery thriller.

But Paul is deadly serious.

The **freedom** he preaches about is how we maintain our standing before God not based on anything that we **do**. It's all **God's** work.

The **slavery** he warns about is the **extra requirements** that the Jewish Christians wanted to impose on these new believers – especially circumcision for men – a physical sign that a man was a practicing Jew. Paul considers such impositions from the Jewish Law as being like a yoke of slavery.

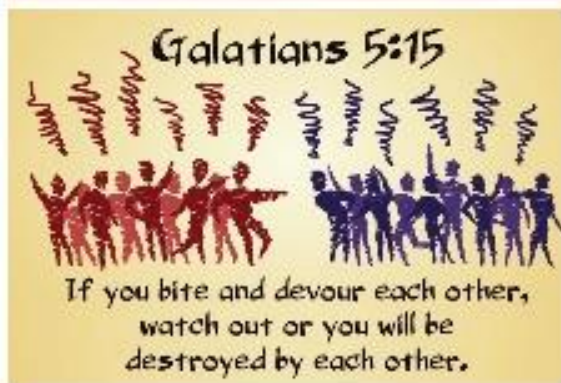
Paul warns the church that if they adopt these Jewish customs they must comply with the **whole** Jewish Law and thus fall away from **grace** and effectively reject the work of Christ. It's all pretty black and white for Paul.

But his insistence on grace alone and faith alone raises another significant problem ... if there is no Law that we have to follow, **what regulates our behaviour and our ethics?**

Are we free to just live however we like?

Does too much emphasis on **freedom** result in selfish **indulgence** or is there another way through this moral dilemma?

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.
Galatians 5:1



As a Jew, Paul could never condone a moral free-for-all where everyone just did whatever they liked. According to Paul such an approach quickly leads to all sorts of lustful and selfish behaviours and he lists several – anger, quarrels, envy, promiscuous sex, drunkenness. This no-rules way of living risks us biting and devouring one another, destroying any sense of community.

Unfortunately, some church communities through history have fallen into this way of behaving and it's ugly – people get hurt and the reputation of the church is trashed. A glaring and sobering example of this is the child sexual abuse that happened in Australian churches for decades that was quietly ignored or condoned by those in authority. Don't go there says Paul.

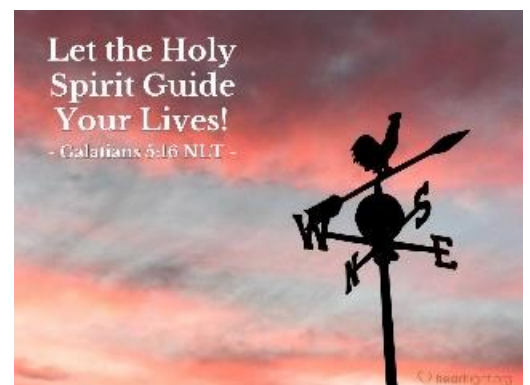


There's a better way – summed up in the simple command of Jesus to **love our neighbour as ourselves**, which is a summary of the whole Jewish Law according to Paul. Ironically, if we freely choose this way of love, we will become servants – slaves – of one another.

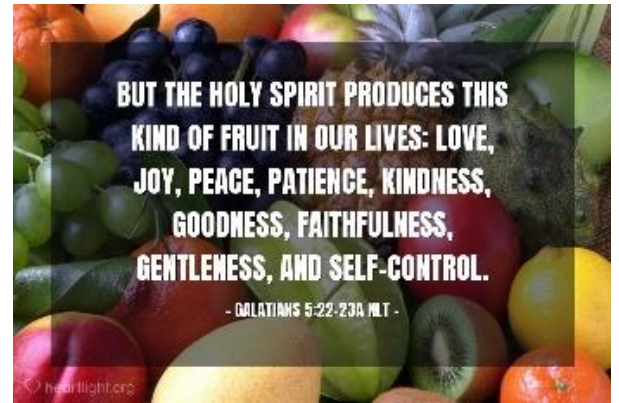
Unlike the Jewish Law with its long lists of what is **not** allowed, the command to love our neighbour is **positive** and very **open-ended** – there are no limits on the many ways we can love our neighbour.

While this may sound a bit vague and therefore difficult to live out, this way of living is simple – keep in step with God's Spirit, be guided by God's Spirit and let God's character be grown in your life.

What does this love of neighbour look like?

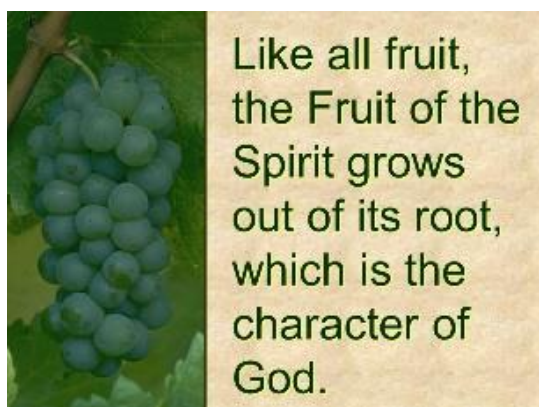


- It looks like seeking **peace** rather than prolonging arguments
- It means experiencing **inner joy** even when outward circumstances are difficult
- It's shown by extending **kindness** and **generosity** to others, especially to those who can't repay you
- it means being consistently **faithful** to God's ways of justice and mercy
- it means being **gentle** and **patient** with other people, especially those you might disagree with. We take our cue from Jesus.
- And it means exercising **self-control** when you'd rather speak your mind or do something you'll regret later



Paul calls these behaviours the **fruit of the Spirit** and they sound a lot like Paul's definition of love that he gives in 1 Corinthians 13, the passage often read at weddings ... that love is patient, love is kind ... the sort of love we see demonstrated in the life of Jesus.

Now **fruit** is flavoursome and healthy. It starts as a flower bud that gradually grows and develops. It doesn't develop overnight, but rather needs care and attention from the gardener, and to remain fruitful, trees and vines need pruning ... I've just pruned our four fruit trees this week – which is a time-consuming task and one that always feels to mean to the tree ... yet from experience is vital to ensure the tree remains fruitful.



The fruits that Paul writes about may be considered **learned behaviours** ... we can learn to be kind just as we can learn to hate.

But it's instructive that Paul calls these behaviours **fruit of the Spirit** ... suggesting that they reflect the **character of God** and that they grow in our hearts and in our lives through the **presence and activity of God's Spirit**.

Way back in the writings of Jeremiah the prophet, God promised that one day God's

laws would be written on our hearts (Jer 31:33–34) ... so that we would no longer need to obey a written set of laws, but rather we would know God and God's ways from within. How was this to happen? By the gift of God's Spirit – who is God's presence in our lives and in our community.

Thanks to God's indwelling Spirit, we have freedom to know and listen to the quiet voice of God within ... which gives us freedom to love others ... and freedom to follow the ways and example of Christ.

Paul writes that there is **no law** against such an approach. Rather, it's how God's character is grown in our lives – by the Spirit working within us and among us – growing flavoursome, healthy and God-given fruit that enables us to love our neighbour.

As we discovered during the covid lockdowns, loss of certain freedoms didn't mean that we stopped being kind or loving other people. It looked and felt different, but we found new ways to stay in touch and to offer kindness. We learned new behaviours to suit the new situation.

The Uniting Church Basis of Union describes the church as a pilgrim people always on the way towards a promised goal – meaning that on this side of heaven we never fully arrive but keep learning and being challenged by one another and being spurred on by one another. The Basis also notes that we have the gift of the Spirit so that we may not lose the way.

We're going to sing a song now that picks up several elements of Paul's message to the Galatian church. It's called For freedom Christ has set us free. I hope you'll recognize the tune, which Jean might play through for us before we sing.