

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 2: 1-11
SECOND LESSON: Galatians 5:1; 13-25
July 3, 2022

“True Freedom”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Not many people come right out and say it, but there a lot that live by this simple motto: “I don’t do anything that I don’t want to do.”

- I don’t want to vacuum, or wash the dishes. Someone else can do it.
- I don’t want to cook. I’ll get fast food.
- I don’t want to study. It’ll be fine.
- I don’t want to get up and go to work. I’ll call in sick.
- I don’t want to have to be nice to people. People get on my last nerve.
- I don’t want to stop looking at my phone. I can drive and text at the same time.
- I don’t want to get off my computer and listen to what you are saying.

You are not as interesting as what I just saw on Snapchat.

This person sounds like a real brat, don’t they? But while teenagers and sometimes even young adults excel at this type of behavior, lurking deep within us we all have an inner brat. We all have a part of ourselves that says **I want what I want when I want it. I want to be free.** Freedom in this sense means freedom from constraints and responsibilities. But this type of “freedom” lays burdens on others. It’s not really freedom; it’s self-indulgence. And in point of fact, the person who lives by the standard of “I’ll do it if I feel like it” is not really free at all. They are slaves to their own whims, inertia, laziness and selfishness. They will never accomplish much in life, nor will they experience a deep and fulfilling relationship with another human being. All of these things require selflessness and effort.

Paul says that it is for freedom that Christ set us free. We are to stand firm and not fall into slavery again. Freedom is not found in what he calls “indulging the flesh” and what I am calling “being ruled by our inner brat.” As Paul defines it freedom is something else entirely.

We find ourselves in a very interesting situation right now that fits Paul’s principles perfectly. We are free to not wear masks. The Montgomery County Covid danger level is LOW. And yet many among us have compromised immune systems and are fearful. Therefore, the loving thing to do is forego our personal freedom, and wear a mask in church as an expression of love for one another. We are free—free to choose to do the loving thing. Paul says we are to use our freedom to “serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ And he adds, “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other,” which is certainly what the world around us does. Paul says we

don't have freedom *from* service but *for* service to others. This is the kind of freedom that produces a strong and loving community of believers.

The acts of the flesh, that selfish center we all have, are dead set against the ways of the Spirit. And while most of the time when we think "sins of the flesh" we go straight to the type of sin Las Vegas is famous for, most of what Paul mentions has nothing to do with sex. In fact, what Paul was doing in giving us a list of vices and virtues was a common practice of the time. Philosophers often did this. Everything including the kitchen sink was thrown in. And Paul included all the standards—sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry and sorcery. Sorcery is a more accurate translation than witchcraft. It really means casting spells using drugs. But significantly Paul included a lot of things that are not as dramatic, things that involve the way we treat one another. "Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy" all destroy our relationships with one another. People form cliques. They talk about each other. They become alienated from one another. They develop strong opinions and closed minds. They become jealous and envious and form grudges. And it can happen in any community, and even in any family. When we serve the flesh we are enslaved. We have given away our freedom because we are not free to do the right thing.

The flesh can disable us in two ways, ways that we have all experienced. The first involves action, and the second inaction.

We want to have harmonious relationships but then someone criticizes us and we get defensive. Or things don't go our way. It's like I wrote a script but no one else seems to know their lines and they aren't doing what I want them to do. They don't seem to know they have a part in my play and they're just not cooperating. The tension builds and angry words are said. Before long I have gathered together a group of people to talk about this person who is so obviously at fault. That person responds by doing the same thing, and we're off to the races. A tiny spark has just created a huge fire. The flesh is running the show, and it does so because resisting the flesh feels like fighting against gravity. It's easy to sink. It's hard to rise above. We don't feel like doing the hard work of reconciliation. Self-justification feels much better! We don't want to admit we are part of the problem. We want it to be all that other person's fault. We don't want to have to change. That's all humbling and messy and doesn't feel good at all.

The flesh is also really good at disabling us into inaction. I really want to accomplish something. I want to fix up my home, or create something beautiful, or complete a project. But I don't feel like it. It will require effort on my part. I'm going to have to get up. I'm going to have to do labor, or concentrate. I may need to go out and buy supplies. Whatever it is, it is not going to get done by itself. And so it doesn't get done, because I am enslaved by "I don't feel like it." "I don't feel like it," and "I don't want to" are often also in league with "I'm not in the mood," and when they all get together I'm on the couch all day with a bag of chips.

Brokenness and inertia win when the flesh rules us. Doing to others as we would want done to us requires work. Doing any task requires work! We

have to reject the flesh in order to do what is right. And often that will mean choosing to set aside what I want, to meet the needs of someone else.

If we are led by the Spirit the fruit of the Spirit is entirely different from the fruit of bondage to the flesh. But it is a choice, and it's a choice we make every day. The Holy Spirit will work in us, opening our eyes, our hearts and our minds. We're not left to fix this mess on our own. God is mercy and love. But even though salvation is by grace alone, it does involve our active participation. The bottom line always comes back to this: We are to treat one another the way we would want to be treated. And we want to be met by others with love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If we are living God's way, this is the way we live.

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July. We celebrate independence. We celebrate freedom. But as we do so as Christians we need to be aware of what freedom really is. We have become so ruthlessly and exclusively individualistic in our society that we ignore the impact our actions have on others. The pursuit of happiness has overruled the pursuit of God's will. That is not freedom. That is selfishness. To be free in Christ, means to be free to do what is right. In Paul's words, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Amen

Proverbs 2: 1-11

- 2** My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
- 2** turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
- 3** indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
- 4** and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
- 5** then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
- 6** For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
- 7** He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
- 8** for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.
- 9** Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path.
- 10** For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.
- 11** Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.

Galatians 5:1; 13-25

5 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.

13 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. **14** For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” **15** If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** 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. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; **20** idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions **21** 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.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **24** Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.