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<sup>1</sup> For freedom Christ has set us free.  
Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.  
<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.  
<sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus  
have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.  
<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:1, 16, 24-25

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In just over a week's time the United States will be having a long weekend as they celebrate their 'Independence Day'. Independence Day is day where the United States commemorates the 'Declaration of Independence', which was ratified by the Second Continental Congress on Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1776. Celebrations on this day includes family reunions, concerts, barbecues, picnics, parades, baseball games, and the ubiquitous fireworks. Fireworks and freedom...

When you think of the word 'freedom', what do you think about? What does 'freedom' look for you right now? Is it 'freedom' from some 'family conflict'? Is it 'freedom' from some health or economic woe? Is it 'freedom' from some inner fear? What is 'freedom'? What does 'freedom' look like for you?

When it comes to the idea of 'freedom', there is also something else to keep in mind: how is this 'freedom' to be maintained? The simple reality is that those who declared 'Independence' from British Rule and Law then had to draw up their own 'rules and laws' so that they could maintain their freedom. There is a paradox here. One can only experience true freedom when there are good laws in place. A world without 'The Rule of Law' is ultimately a world of chaos and war.

What does it really mean to 'be free'? Are you 'free to do whatever you like'?

Of course, when we talk about 'freedom' today, freedom and fireworks often go together – but not the Fourth of July kind, mind you. Rather, the kind of fireworks that erupt when different people's "freedoms" conflict. No matter what the issue — almost all talk of freedom, rights and power seems to lead to fireworks of conflict.

Have you ever felt yourself to be in conflict with ideas of those around you? If so, what is your 'reference point' for what is 'right and wrong'? Is it God's Word, his Law? Or is it your own flesh's desires?

One could address the notion of freedom in our culture as license to do "whatever I want" or to gratify every desire. "As long as I am not hurting anyone," so the saying goes. Yet unbridled self-indulgence is rarely harmless to the self or others. It inevitably leads to using others for one's own ends, while the sinful self is never satisfied, always unfulfilled.

Paul offers a radically different understanding of freedom. The freedom Christ gives is not freedom for self-indulgence but the true freedom that comes from Christ. Paul says this (Galatians 5:1): "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Paul says we're free, and he says this emphatically. He literally says that it's for freedom that Christ has freed us. Freedom is both the verb and the noun.

Jesus' whole mission was to free us. Paul tells us in the clearest terms that in Jesus Christ we have been freed. Sounds great' doesn't it? But what does this really mean for us? What does it mean when you think of the things that weigh you down in your heart? What does this mean when you're trying to survive in this world? What does this mean when we see all sorts of terrible things happening in this world? Is there really such a thing as 'freedom'?

The reality is that, from a human point of view, we never really get what freedom truly means. So many people who speak of 'freedom' then have a whole bunch of 'rules' (the way you should behave), and so often we wonder if we are simply trading one lot of 'rules' for a whole bunch of others that will also eventually get us down...

But the simple reality is that human reason cannot properly evaluate this gift. Who can fully appreciate the blessing of the forgiveness of sins and of everlasting life? Many today claim to be 'free', but they are not. Listen carefully to many who claim to 'set you free' (from whatever it is that ails you), and very soon you will hear a whole bunch of other things you 'have to do' (rules/behaviour) in order to experience this 'freedom'.

The simple reality is that our human reason prefers the righteousness of the Law to the righteousness of faith, Paul calls the Law a yoke, a yoke of bondage. Peter, when speaking at the first ever Church Synod in Jerusalem, also calls it a yoke. " Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10.)

Luther describes it this way: *"Paul compares those who seek to be justified by the Law to oxen that are hitched to the yoke. Like oxen that toil in the yoke all day, and in the evening are turned out to graze along the dusty road, and at last are marked for slaughter when they no longer can draw the burden, so those who seek to be justified by the Law are "entangled with the yoke of bondage," and when they have grown old and broken-down in the service of the Law they have earned for their perpetual reward God's wrath and everlasting torment."*

But you have true and absolute freedom in Christ. You are saved in Jesus. That's God's 'free gift' to you. Christ is your liberty and life. Therefore law, sin, and death may not hurt you or drive you to despair. This is the 'Constitution' of our priceless liberty. Yes, if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

But as Paul also warns us, we are to take care that we do not use our wonderful liberty for an occasion of the flesh. Paul says (Galatians 5:13): *“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.”* Satan likes to turn this liberty which Christ has gotten for us into a ‘permission to do whatever your body (the ‘flesh’) desires’. For Paul the law is a guide in the darkness, a path toward justice in the “present evil age” (Romans 1:4). But what is important for us to remember is that the holy, just, and good law (Romans 7:12) cannot defeat the power of sin.

Is there a place for the law then in this new faith in Christ? For Paul, Christ has fulfilled the law by embodying what the love of neighbour looks like. In Galatians 5:14, he writes, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” In all this, we are not ‘under the law’, but live our lives in reference to everything Jesus has done for us. The ‘law’ is simply our spiritual and moral reference point for what it means to love God and neighbour in this world.

Paul’s understanding of love (agapē), of course, is not about sentimentality or warm feelings. It is the self-giving love God has shown us in Christ, “who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). This kind of love goes far beyond what the law demands. It is an all-encompassing way of life, constantly seeking to serve the neighbour.

For Paul, freedom is less about freedom from something, and more about a call to or for something else. He is quick to point out that the freedom won for believers in Christ is not just license to do whatever we please, but rather is something that brings us together.

Paul continues describing the contrast between life according to the flesh and life according to the Spirit. The NRSV translates verse 16 as two parallel imperatives: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The second part of verse 16 would be better translated as a statement of future results, conditional on the previous clause. In other words: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and you will by no means gratify the desires of the flesh.” When the Spirit is in command, the flesh loses its power.

As Christians, we desire to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18) because the Holy Spirit is in fact, the very life of each true believer. It is only through Him that we have access in prayer to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). When we worship God, we “must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Pauls says, “Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:24). Jesus has freed us from slavery to sin and has given us His Spirit. Verse 25 is a condition of fact: “If we live by the Spirit (and we do), let us also be guided by the Spirit.” The verb ‘keep in step’ has military connotations of standing in formation or marching in line. In other words, “since the Spirit leads us, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

From the moment we were baptised, we are called to live by the Spirit. He is always with us, to guide our steps, to bear witness with our spirit and to let us know that we belong to God.

Don't ever let anyone take that freedom away from you. Don't look to yourself or your performance to judge how you stand with God. You will never measure up. And if you think you do, you are only deceiving yourself. Stand fast, stand firm, in the freedom Christ has won for you. Yes, if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. This is what it means to follow Christ. Instead of relying on our own obedience, we rest in the righteousness by faith. And this means looking to Christ instead of into our selves.

How many times have your thought or heard, "I am not a good enough for God." "I have made too many mistakes and need to be better." "I will never be perfect enough for God to accept me." Actually, all those statements are absolutely true. (What??). Yes! You are not good enough, you are a screw up, and you can try, but you will never be perfect enough, and the more you try, the more you will realise this to be the case. (Again, What??). This is THE yoke. It's is this idea that we need to be good enough for God so we try harder and harder to earn our way to Him. It's futile. You try all you want, but you will be a slave to this idea of earning.

You will never be good enough, that's the problem. But Jesus is the answer. Jesus says, "Let Me set you free! Since you cannot get to God, let Me come to you!" Jesus came to make a way back to God through Himself. Jesus stands in our place, takes on all our failure and sins, so that we don't have to. He literally takes our yoke so we can be free. And speaking of free, Jesus does this out of pure love and mercy. We call that grace. We do nothing to earn it, we only have to receive it. Our identity, our justification, our inheritance as God's children is secured solely by God's promise made good in Christ Jesus. We can never earn our way to God, we can just receive Him.

Through Jesus Christ and the victory of the Cross, Paul tells us that we have been set free from our enslavement, set free to reflect the love that has been shown to us. We have been set free to live the life that God would have us live, and in turn bring God's love to others. The great thing about love is that it is such a positive thing. For those who are living under the shadow of fear, or struggling with their faith Jesus sweeps those shadows aside and shows with such power that Love overcomes, Love fulfils all the requirements of the Law, and Love not only draws us close to God but draws us close to our brothers and sisters. Lord, may our lives reflect the love that You have shown to us in Jesus. Amen.