

“The Shape of Freedom”

Scripture: **Proverbs 3:3-8; Galatians 5:1, 13-26**

Rev. Lewis Galloway

June 28, 2026



When I was growing up, my parents and I had two very different notions of freedom. In those distant days in South Carolina, a young person could get a driver's license at 14. I thought that when I got my license, I would be free to go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and with whomever I wanted. I could barely see over the steering wheel. My parents gave me freedom; but they also gave me guidelines about where I could go and when I could go. To me, freedom was boundless and full throttle. To them, freedom brought responsibility. To them, freedom had a shape and a form. It took a lot of mishaps and more than a few years for me to come to appreciate the difference between our understandings of freedom. The kind of freedom I wanted would prove to be a new kind of bondage. The kind of freedom they envisioned would prove to be a path to abundant life.

Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." (5:1,13) In the letter to the Galatians, Paul wants us to see that following Jesus is the path to freedom. The Christian life is a life of freedom not bondage, of joy not misery, and of love not fear. In Galatians, Paul declares in a myriad of ways how the grace of God in Jesus Christ sets us free from the power of sin. More than that, God set us free from our anxious efforts to earn God's love and to prove our worth.

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We belong to God. We belong to God not because of what we have done or what we might do to earn God's love. We belong to God because God has come to us in Jesus Christ to claim us as God's own children. We are heirs together with Christ to all the promises of God. Paul says that we are no longer minor children waiting to become adults to receive our inheritance. We are God's children now.

As God's children, we have the Holy Spirit in our lives so that our lives might be vitally connected to the life of God. As Paul says earlier in his letter, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (2:20). Our new life flows from God's love for us in Jesus Christ. The power of God's love in us leads us, in return, to love God and love our neighbor. This is why Paul can say that the commandment to love our neighbors is the summary of the whole law.

We are free to love. Christian freedom does not mean that we are free to do whatever we want to do; Christian freedom means that we are free to do what God wants us to do. What God wants us to do is to love others as God has loved us. In his catechism, Martin Luther wrote on the First Commandment, "Thou shall have no other gods before me," Luther expressed his

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conviction that having the right relationship with God is the proper foundation for everything else we do in life. Luther wrote, "Where the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is observed, all the other [commandments] follow." If we love God, then we will love others as God has loved us.

Each one of us could name someone in our life in whom we have seen the Spirit of God at work through the power of love. I remember a retired banker whose gruff humor sometimes hid his kindness. Each week he would spend considerable time reading the church bulletin, the words of the hymns, and all of the announcements onto a tape for a blind couple in the church. Then the couple would create a Braille transcript of the service. In worship on Sunday, I could see this couple with the pages of Braille in their laps heartily singing the hymns. If I made a mistake in the announcements or in the liturgy, they were quick to correct me after the service. I remember a woman whose quiet acts of gentle and patient service touched the lives of many. When she was delivering Meals on Wheels, she came to the small apartment of a lady who was dying of kidney failure. That day, the lady was critically ill. As she was on hospice, she did not want my friend to call 911. She did not have any family to be with her. So, my friend waited with her for hours until the hospice nurse came to help.

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We never cease to be amazed by those who have faced great adversity but who always manage to have a positive spirit, those who have been hurt by others but refuse to become bitter, those who have little of the world's goods but are always the first to share what they have with those in need. Such people manifest the freedom to love.

Paul contrasts two ways of living, the way of bondage and the way of freedom. The way of bondage is life according to the flesh; the way of freedom is life according to the Spirit. Paul says that we should not use our freedom as an "occasion for the flesh." The word "flesh" means more than the physical self or the physical dimensions of our lives. It refers to the total self pushing God out and trying to be in control of our lives. To live according to the flesh is not just committing obvious visible sins such as gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual immorality. It is also about the sins of the mind such as pride, greed, envy, laziness and hatred. We are not to use our freedom as an excuse to do what our selfish nature wants to do.

To live according to the Spirit is to let God guide and direct our freedom. It is to rely not on our own strength and insight, but to rely on the power and wisdom of God's Spirit within us. I have used the words we read from Proverbs in many marriage services. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge God,

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and God will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5, 6) When a couple enters into the covenant of marriage, a world of possibilities opens up before them. What shape will their life together take? How will they face the challenges of children, dual careers, disappointments, hurt feelings, financial woes, broken promises, and serious illness? These words remind couples building a life together that only God can give them the ability to fulfill the promises they make. It is the Spirit who enables us to keep our promises and to love others as God would have us love them. God calls us to live a life of responsible freedom. Freedom is a gift. Freedom is hard work. A life that is free is a disciplined life.

Paul says that the fruits of the Spirit are the signs of Christian freedom. We are invited to live a new life marked by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." This is the shape of our freedom. These are the signs of the Christian life. Many people define what it means to be a Christian in negative terms. Christians are those who don't do this or don't do that particular list of sins. Well, there is some truth in this. Sin, or as Paul calls it here, the works of the flesh, bring death. This is not the whole truth; it is not the central truth of the gospel.

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What Paul is inviting us to see is that in the Christian life, our efforts and our vision should be focused on the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, the Christian life is about far more than simply avoiding evil. The Christian life is about the amazing gift God has given us to do the good. We have all known Christians who claim to know the Bible through and through and who can quote chapter and verse on a multitude of topics, but their lives are devoid of the simple gifts of the Spirit. We know Christians whose main concerns are about condemning the sins of others and deciding who is saved and who is not, but do not express love, joy, peace or patience and do not demonstrate kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness or self-control. Indeed, we have known enough small-minded, judgmental, self-righteous, cold-blooded and mean-spirited Christians to give Jesus a bad name. Thank God, we have seen and known far more Christians who are full of love for God and love for neighbor. These are the ones who show us all the possibilities that Christian freedom can bring.

Theologian Paul Tillich tells the story of woman he knew named Elsa Brandstrom, a Swedish diplomat's daughter. She served as a nurse in a camp for war prisoners in the First World War. Tillich describes how she had to deal with the terrible conditions of the camp and the cruel violence of the guards. There was hunger, cold, depravation, and disease. She ministered to all the prisoners with gifts of food, water, kindness, love, and encouragement.

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After the war, she began a program to care for war orphans. Tillich noted, "We never had a theological conversation. It was unnecessary. She made God transparent in every moment. For God, who is love, was abiding in her and she in God." (*The Power of Love* by Paul Tillich, quoted in *Testimony* by Tom Long, p. 25.)

We all want freedom. We have different notions of what it means to be free. As we approach the 250th anniversary of our country, I can't help thinking about how we exercise our freedom as citizens of this great nation. What does it mean to be free and to live in a land that cherishes freedom? As Christians who understand the freedom to practice the fruit of the Spirit, we engage in our national life as those who demonstrate "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" in our public life and in our personal life. In other words, we stand for and seek those things that promote love in the face of hatred, joy in the face of despair, peace in the face of conflict, patience in the face of intemperance, kindness in the face of cruelty, and generosity in the face of selfishness. We lift up the needs of the poor, we seek justice for all, and we demand truth and integrity in our leaders. We call our nation to its highest and best ideals. This struggle to live in our land on the basis of our Christian freedom is powerfully expressed in James Weldon Johnson's poetic hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. The hymn, which we will sing at the close of our worship, describes the struggle that African-

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Americans have endured over the generations. Empowered by the freedom Christ gives these, faithful men and women labored and sacrificed to see that same freedom become a reality in our national life. These words capture the dream of freedom, the hard work of freedom, and the cost of the struggle for justice. Listen:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song
full of the hope the present has brought us. Facing the rising sun of our
new day begun, let us march on, til victory is won.

Through faith we learn that freedom is not about squandering our lives in aimless self-indulgence. Paul says that the practice of Christian freedom is summed up in these words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”