

Freedom in the Spirit

When I made my confession of faith in Christ, my circle of high school friends came from many different churches and they were all recruiting me. Their suggestions about what I should do if I really wanted to serve God included: I should be baptized in their church; model the Christ life by dressing conservatively and not wearing jewelry; experience the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”; and to join their church because it was the only true New Testament church. So I began to read, study, and ask lots of questions. I also carefully watched how all my friends lived every day and modeled faith in God. It took me two and a half years to determine my direction by deciding what really mattered: 1) a church that loves God cares about people with needs; 2) a church that gives itself away in ministry; 3) a church that seeks the Spirit’s leading in programming and funds management; 4) a church that values faith more than rule keeping or creeds.

Paul is on the cutting edge of a new Christian movement. He knows the contrived religions of the world, the burdens of legalism and the concept of the only Eternal God and his love. He is a brilliant theologian who is willing to risk everything to help the lost world experience God’s grace. This is why Paul strongly confronts any teaching or person that attempts to force faith in God into a mold of sacrifices, legalism or superstition. His joyful motto is ... “Christ has set us free for freedom” (v. 1). But this life of spiritual freedom does not leave room for selfishness, pride or any claim to spiritual superiority.

Human nature encompasses a desire to succeed, gain respect, know all the answers (a playbook of secret knowledge) and be in control. Since the Garden of Eden, humankind has repeated the hunger of our spiritual ancestors to know what God knows. When we read a letter like Galatians we quickly note nothing changes as generation after generation repeats the same mistakes. Paul alerts us to the truth that, in spite of the lessons repeated in the Old Testament and the ultimate appearance of God’s grace in Jesus the Christ, we still have trouble following the lead of God’s Spirit. Paul tells us to “stand

firm” in Christ, to avoid being bound up in the slavery of religious legalism and to turn away from selfishness (vv. 1, 16-17). There are two clear dangers inherent in the idea of freedom: to ignore the leading and help of God’s Spirit (legalism) or to substitute our own manual of religious operations for faith (libertinism). Paul warns the Galatians about “another gospel” (v. 6) which involved keeping the Law in order to be a “true” Christian. Paul understood the frustrations and endless burden of trying to live by the Law. He no longer serves God to earn God’s love but because he lives in the embrace of God’s love.

Verse 16 actually says we are “to walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (NASV). “To walk” is a common Greek metaphor for living a specific lifestyle. We often use a similar metaphor when we describe the Christian life as a “journey” or “pilgrimage.” His point is that instead of trying to keep a rigid list of rules, we follow God’s Spirit each day, seeking to live by the example of Jesus. This means we cannot keep to ourselves what is easy or comfortable, but, with the Spirit’s help we become an example of what it means to be a child of God. Have you ever really considered the uncertainty and frustration of knowing you can never live up to the Law? Compare that pressure with the knowledge that Christ knows your every weakness yet he chose to love you and die for you.

Our last national election illustrates the flawed idea of so many about what it means to be a Christian. I was particularly alarmed when some ministers supported candidate Trump as a “Christian” in spite of his embarrassing record in business, language, bigotry, moral failures, sexual innuendos and ignorance of a basic Christian beliefs. How can this be possible? Sadly, in the freedom of America, too many want to claim we are particularly blessed by God without any interest in living by the example of Jesus. The Old Testament should be an obvious warning of the consequences when someone claims God’s favor while ignoring the Spirit’s leading! Paul offers a graphic list of evidence when people close their heart to God: “idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry,

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jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that ... those who do these kind of things won’t inherit God’s kingdom” (vv. 19-21).

In carefully chosen words, Paul contrasts the qualities (fruit of the Spirit) which should mark those who are God’s people (vv. 22-23). **Love** begins the list because it marks the intersection of our faith in God. **Joy** is the evidence you have experienced God’s forgiveness and rest secure in his arms. **Peace** is the awareness that in every circumstance, even when tangible evidence is absent, you can trust God’s promises. **Patience**, perhaps hardest for us all, is the ability to hold on to God because he loved us all the way to the cross. **Kindness**, which is often rare in these days, is the ability to act out of concern and beyond fear and uncertainty to see others through the eyes of God and help them by the Spirit’s power. **Faithfulness** is the godly pattern resulting from living that has been tested and challenged and grows stronger. **Gentleness** comes from love that never forgets God loved us first and has never stopped loving us ... so we press on. **Self-control** is probably the most challenging characteristic of a Christian life because it can overcome hurt, fear, uncertainty and defeat by holding on to grace.

We are not merely reading the words of a strong-willed man who mastered the Torah, was a Roman citizen and held an amazing record of planting churches in the Roman Empire. This was a man whose intellect and status generated success and power, yet he laid it all aside to serve Christ, knowing he would probably be silenced by his own people or the Romans. So we must ask ourselves are we serving Christ, a religious organization or self-interests? Do our words and actions reflect the grace of God? Can we find in our life the qualities of faith enumerated by Paul? Do we dare speak the truth in a society that prefers deception and selfishness? Religion is common in our world, but does our faith in Christ set us apart by our values, treatment of others and ethical standards? Are we free in the Spirit?

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