

What to do with Freedom

People who spend a long time in prison and who are eventually released, usually have a very difficult time getting used to their freedom. During their years in prison they came to accept their situation as, somehow, normal. Their expectations for daily existence were shaped by this new environment, one in which there were few meaningful choices to make, little of the privacy they once took for granted and harsh conditions among a group of people they might well be terrified of.

It's especially hard on those who are sent to prison while still young, while still forming their beliefs about life and how to cope with its challenges. They tend to fairly quickly adapt to the idea that they have very few choices to make, that the institution will make their choices for them. They also count on the institution to set limits on their behaviour. Prisons have many regulations that set very clear boundaries on the inmates and which carry with them swift and severe penalties for those who choose to violate those boundaries.

Because inmates are being constantly monitored, it's the norm that they will be caught when guilty of even minor infractions and so they gradually lose their internal controls, relying instead on the inescapable controls of the prison. "Okay, I can't get away with anything around here; they're watching all the time, so I'll just have to toe the line until I can get out."

Another element of prison life is the danger posed by those who share your space. People in prisons learn quickly that there are others who will exploit any weakness they find in you and so they learn to become cautious in all relationships, suspicious, fearful. From that comes the learned behaviour of being the tough convict, the one others are afraid of. One researcher wrote that many inmates believe that they have to convey a potential for violence and that failure to do that returns domination and exploitation on them.

People learn to be constantly afraid, to stay away from certain areas of the prison, to keep within range of some kind of defensive weapon or just to stay in their cells. The younger the prisoner, the more likely to use aggressive strategies to deal with the threats, the perceived slights and the potential conflicts that are normal to prison life.

Emotions that are felt are often not expressed because they might reveal a vulnerability that others would later exploit. Many long-term prisoners find they have lost touch with their feelings because they have spent much of their adult lives hiding them. This emotional mask makes it difficult for them to bridge a relational gap once they have been released into the outside world. But it also makes them isolated from meaningful interaction during their time in prison as they retreat deeply into themselves and trust virtually no one.

One study of long-term prisoners said they show a flatness of response which resembles slow, automatic behavior of a very limited kind and that they are humorless and lethargic. Another study of women prisoners who had already served long

sentences compared their plight to that of persons who are terminally ill, whose experience is unfeeling, cut off from the outside and who use this attitude to help them cope.

Inmates don't get to choose when they eat, what they eat, when they get up or when the lights go out at night. If they share a cell, they don't get to choose the person with whom they share it. They don't have a choice in whether or for how long they can shower or make a phone call. This loss of individualism makes them feel like children, like infants who must be told what to do and how to do it on a constant basis. Some of them will take this stigma, this degrading standard of personal evaluation, with them when they are released into the world of free people.

One of the saddest aspects of the psychological effects of being imprisoned for a lengthy time period is that doing their time reinforces some of the feelings of abandonment, abuse and victimization that produced their criminal behavior in the first place. When they are subjected to fear of attack from fellow inmates, the fear of being dominated by others, the lack of respect and concern for their well-being that is typical of prison life, they will remember, at least in their emotions, the fears and lack of love and respect they experienced growing up.

What happens to these people when they are released? Typically, they will feel more comfortable, more confident, in the presence of people who understand what they've been through. Most do not find that there is a list of highly-paid positions waiting for them on the outside. Their choices are diminished by their criminal record and they tend to live at the margins of society. There is often no one to tell them what to do in order to succeed and their relationships are typically characterized by the domination or submission they learned in prison.

I would hope that by now you are wondering what this has to do with Galatians 5, so let me tell you. First, let me read the passage for this week, which is just 3 verses long:

For you, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom -- not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if instead of showing love among yourselves you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

We have been called to live in freedom. The problem is, we don't know how to live in freedom because, until we met Jesus, we had never been free. Like the inmate in the prison, we weren't able to do all that we wanted to, but were led along by peers and by leaders to do things that weren't good. We were afraid of certain people, people who didn't like us, who said and did unkind things towards us. We wore masks in order to make people give us space or in order to make them like us, or at least accept us. We let others make choices for us, and we went along with those choices. We learned that there were some things that we shouldn't share with certain people; in

fact, we learned that most of our peers in our youth couldn't be trusted with personal information. With each person's experience, there is a story of things you learned, things that you adapted to, whether you wanted to or not, in order to get along with others, in order to be accepted, in order to feel safe.

None of this prepares us for the opportunity and the command of these verses: we are called to live in freedom so that we can freely serve and bless one another in love. There's nothing in our world that equips us for a life of love. In the world we learn fear, we learn to protect ourselves, we learn to develop our natural gifts of selfishness, we learn how to fight, we learn how to hide, but we don't learn how to serve one another in love. That's not what the world is all about and that's not what it teaches. So when we come to this passage and try to hear and apply what Paul is saying, we need to start by admitting that we're not ready for this. We've been prepared for something different, something more about self-fulfilment, something more about the pursuit of filling my needs and finding my happiness. We're not prepared for the world that Paul talks about and therefore we don't actually know how to do it.

All you have to do is look at the Galatians and you'll see that they weren't prepared for this either. Paul says that their danger is that they are always biting and devouring one another instead of showing love among themselves. What does that tell us? It says that although they were glad to receive Jesus' offer of forgiveness of sins and although they were excited about the gifts of the Spirit and seeing people healed and delivered, they weren't prepared for the idea of serving one another in love. Listen to this 15th verse again:

But if instead of showing love among yourselves you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

There's a great advertising campaign for a church that is reaching into the community: come and help us destroy one another, or at least engage in some biting and devouring. By the way, and you might have guessed this, all three of these words that Paul uses to describe what was going on in the churches of Galatia -- biting, devouring, destroying -- were commonly used in Hellenistic Greek to suggest wild animals engaged in a deadly struggle.

We know that they had just been influenced by Judaizers, by people who wanted them to become as fully Jewish in their beliefs and practices as they were Christians, but that was only part of what had them fighting. Certainly there were disagreements about whether the Judaizers should be listened to or not, and certainly there would have been strong feelings about both sides of that issue, but the intensity of the fight shows a deeper problem. They were more concerned about issues than they were about people. Each side was so sure they were right, they were blinded to their lack of love and sensitivity towards people who had a different point of view. The thing they were fighting for was personal -- either to attempt to keep the laws of Moses, to observe carefully the feast days, the sacrifices, the rituals of the Jews, OR to live in the freedom that was won for them on the cross, to trust in Christ alone for their salvation. But the thing they were willing to sacrifice was interpersonal, their

relationships with each other.

And Paul says, "You can't do that -- that's too great a price to pay." And in saying that he defines what the freedom that Jesus gives us really is.

You ... have been called to live in freedom -- not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love.

Here's the challenge of the new life. They were no longer to resolve their differences the way they had learned in the prison of sin. They were no longer to live self-centred lives that had been their natural defense while they lived in bondage. The way of life they had learned was in no way compatible with the new life they had been given and so they had to unlearn the old ways and begin to apply the life of the Spirit.

Freedom in the New Testament does not mean the freedom to go back and live like you did before you knew Jesus. Freedom does not mean going back to being a prisoner of Satan and doing the things he influences you to do. Freedom is new and different and it requires us to think in a different way than we used to think before we can fully act in the freedom that God has offered to us. That's another way of saying, "You have been called to live in freedom -- not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature." Where in Scripture do we read that sin equals freedom? Where do we find it in the Bible that what God wants is for us to be able to do whatever we want to do in whatever situation we find ourselves? Nowhere! The Bible never equates real freedom with doing our own thing. Why not?

You don't have to read much of Paul's writing in order to get the answer to that question. He equates doing our own thing with being a slave of sin. He says, very clearly, that it is impossible for us to please God by doing what we want to do. We learned sin and selfishness, pride and rebellion against God, from the world and it led us into bondage, into the prison of isolation from God's will.

Being in prison is not the same as being free -- I think we all get that. But neither is thinking in the same way as we once thought when we were prisoners, slaves of sin. That's not freedom either. Thinking the way we thought when we were prisoners will lead to the same results, day in and day out, as we experienced when we were inmates in Satan's prison camp. So, like the prisoner who is released from a Canadian penitentiary, we have to relearn what life is all about. We have to learn it from God's point of view instead of from the world's point of view. We have to push away the condemnation of the enemy and the expectation that we can make ourselves righteous before God -- and we've looked at that the past two weeks. But we also have to stop focusing on ourselves, our opinions, our desires, our habits, our criticisms of every other person out there, and we MUST learn to love one another.

Don't you find it interesting that this whole letter, written about Jewish legalism and telling new believers to get back to the freedom to which they were called beams in on this issue of Christian relationships? What does how we get along with the person sitting behind us in a church service have to do with overcoming legalism? Apparently, this is what it's all about.

For you, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom -- not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love.

As we saw last week, one of the obvious fruits of legalism is the way it empowers us to be critical of others. “Hey, you belong to Jesus now, you shouldn’t be singing that song, wearing that dress, going to that movie, hanging out with those guys, going to that party, getting a tattoo, dancing to that music, voting for that political party, working at that establishment, or eating pulled pork sandwiches.” Well, some of those are a little extreme, but not in some circles. There are causes to which Christians will jump with enthusiasm and which they will address vigorously. And the result of their vigorous legalism will be that some person or persons will be shamed, will feel put down and excluded from the community, to some degree, and like they are unworthy sinners who are far from God.

I think the Judaizers in Galatia had had that effect on some of the Gentile Christians; had left them feeling guilty and unworthy and like second-class followers of Jesus, just scraping into heaven but not moving from glory to glory. That’s the fruit of legalism -- broken relationships, leading to broken people.

The antidote to this kind of brokenness, to this kind of prideful putting down others to make yourself look better, to a sense of superiority, of false wisdom, that results in a condemnation of others in the body of Christ ... is serving one another in love. This is brilliant.

What happens when legalism takes hold? Someone or someones make their preferences, their ideas, the rule for all. It’s very hard to do that without getting a booster shot from pride. You have to feel superior for either being better than others or being more knowledgeable. You can hardly escape feeling like you’ve been born for such a time as this -- your mission, to improve the lives of those around you. And it doesn’t work while you’re up on the soap-box preaching down to people. It only works when you get down from the soap box and start loving people. Serving is the antidote to pride-filled lecturing. Loving is the antidote to legalism and posturing.

But the starting place for us today is to accept the reality that we didn’t learn “serving one another in love” while we were in the enemy’s prison. We didn’t learn it while we were in bondage to sin. We can learn it now because we have been given a new life and a new leader, but it will not be automatic; there is some old stuff still in us. What do I mean? What we learned growing up, what we continue to learn from the world around us, is how to look after ourselves, how to get what we want, how to influence others to our way of thinking and how to live selfish lives. That’s why our opinion matters so much, why our rights have to be defended at all costs, why we want everyone to know how we’re feeling and why we push our agendas while barely listening to others. That’s what our world is about, what it promotes daily and what influences us continually. This is prison training. We may not totally love it, but it is so in our faces that we can’t avoid it.

Before we can move ahead in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, before we can embrace the freedom that is His gift to us, we have to reject the world's way of thinking. We have to choose love over selfishness and service over pride. It's that simple and it's that revolutionary.

Simple does not mean easy. Just as the freedom that comes to a person who has been incarcerated for years is a challenging and painful adjustment and relearning, so the freedom that God has on offer has to be learned, has to be walked out, has to become ours -- and it takes time, and practice. The rest of Galatians 5 will teach us a lot about how to walk in this freedom. The rest of our lives will also teach us a lot about how to walk in freedom. But for today, let me just say that our freedom in Christ is freedom from our former bondage to Satan's ways, to satisfying the old, sinful nature, and to enter joyfully into serving one another in love. It's a freedom from being in bondage to self and a freedom to bless and build others, for God's glory. It's a whole new world.