

# The Liberty of the Christian Young Person: Free to Serve

*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage....*

*For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. Galatians 5:1, 13*

Freedom is always preferable to bondage.

One who sits in a prison cell looks forward to the day of his release. He who lives under a tyrannical rule looks forward to the day of the death of the leader of his country. And he desires deliverance, who knows the bondage of sin and experiences its misery.

The gospel proclaims that God's people are free—free from rules and laws which govern every part of our lives, as if we are children, and free from slavery to sin.

This freedom we have in Christ. We call it “Christian liberty.”

In this freedom, let us live, serving God, obeying his laws, rejoicing to be free!

## **What Christian Liberty Is**

Liberty is, of course, freedom. So Christian liberty is the freedom which God's people have in Jesus Christ.

This freedom has three aspects to it.

First, it is a freedom to obey God's moral law.

In Adam, all humans were created with this freedom to obey and serve God. But Adam lost this freedom by his sin, and brought the whole human race into bondage to sin. On account of his sin, we are by nature “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Just as Pharaoh would not let the Israelites leave Egypt to serve God, but made them serve him rigorously, so Satan is a cruel tyrant, who will not permit us to obey God, but keeps us in slavery to sin. This is the explanation for “total depravity”; this is why even those actions of the unregenerate which appear to be kind and good, are not truly so.

But we have been freed! In Jesus Christ, we are delivered from this slavery to sin, and given the power to obey God's law again. Read Romans 6 to understand this better. In verse 11, the Holy Spirit through Paul says: "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." And verse 14: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." In this verse, the Spirit does not mean that we are not bound to God's moral law (the ten commandments), for we certainly are. Rather, we are freed from the curse and the dominion of the law, which is to bring us into sin. And notice from verse 22 the blessedness of this freedom: "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life."

Your liberty in Christ, young people, is a freedom to obey God's law! Do not think of God's law as a burden, or as restricting your freedom! It is "the perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25), the law which shows us how the free man ought to live.

Second, our liberty in Christ is a freedom from bondage to the Old Testament ceremonial laws.

Remember that at Mount Sinai, God gave Israel not only the moral law (ten commandments) and civil law (governing Israel's life as a nation) but also the ceremonial laws. These laws governed matters of worship, such as when Israel was to observe feasts, and what she was to bring for sacrifices. The ceremonial laws also governed one's personal life, regulating the need for infants to be circumcised on the eighth day, what foods were clean and unclean, when a man or woman was unclean and by what process he or she could be cleansed, and such matters.

This law was a burden. It regulated every aspect of the life of the Israelites, in detail. In giving them these laws, God was treating them as children, who need every part of their life regulated by their parents, and who need to be taught. Paul tells the Galatians in 3:24: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." The law reminded them that they needed Christ, and could be saved only in Christ.

These laws we need keep no longer, because Christ came to fulfill them. We must still know what they taught us, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ. But we no longer need the ceremonial laws to teach us this; we have the completed Scriptures, and the Spirit of God, to impress this truth on us. The church has come to maturity now; the letter of these laws is abolished. (Read Article 25 of the Belgic Confession to see that this is the teaching of Reformed churches).

This aspect of Christian liberty, the church in Galatia had a hard time understanding. We can appreciate this. The church had just come to maturity at Pentecost, not more

than 25 years earlier. And even more recently, through Paul's mission work, the saints in Galatia had learned of the abolishing of the ceremonial law. So they had to relearn how to live!

Some in Galatia were teaching that Jews and Gentiles alike had to be circumcised to be saved. This Paul means when he says in Galatians 5:2: "Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." By admonishing them to stand fast in this liberty, Paul means to say that the church must now live in the consciousness that Christ has come, and that his atonement by the shedding of his blood is complete.

The moral law remains; the ceremonial law is done away. That is our liberty in Christ.

Yet a third aspect of our liberty in Christ is our freedom to live our whole life, and perform every action, to God's glory.

God's law does not regulate every aspect of the life of believers in the New Testament. It regulates some, by requiring us to do certain things, and forbidding us to do other things. But that which is neither commanded nor forbidden, we are free to do. We call these "adiaphora"—things indifferent; we may do them, or not do them, as we please.

That we may do them as we please does not mean God gives us no principles to guide us. First, the law does place some restrictions on this freedom. For example, you are free to have whatever job you want, so long as it does not lead you to disobey the 4th commandment by working unnecessarily on Sunday, or the 5th by joining a labor union. And I am free to buy whatever car I want, so long as it does not lead me to violate the 8th commandment by spending more on the car than I can afford, and the 6th commandment by driving recklessly and carelessly.

Second, faith must motivate us in all that we do, even our eating and drinking (Romans 14:23). Third, we must seek God's glory in all these things—we may not marry a certain person, or have a certain job, to serve ourselves; we must seek God (I Corinthians 10:31). Fourth, we must be ready to give an answer to God for what we do, and why we did it (Romans 14:12). For, while God gives us some freedom regarding how we live, he does care about our heart at all times.

### **What Christian Liberty is Not**

It is clear, then, that Christian liberty is not a freedom to disobey God's law. To pretend you are free to disobey the law is to show that you are not free, but still in bondage to the law.

And Christian liberty is not the freedom to do whatever I please, no questions asked. It does not mean that if any brother or sister in Christ ever questions my motives and goals for doing something, I may say to them, “None of your business.” Not, that is, if they come convinced I am abusing my liberty, and calling me to use it rightly.

How important that we be reminded of this! It is so easy to use our liberty in Christ as a reason to sin. It is so easy to say to someone who comes to speak to us about our sinful conduct, “But Christ makes me free to do it; you can’t tell me what I’m doing is wrong.”

Some in Galatia were using the liberty they had in Christ as a reason to tell the Gentiles that they must obey the ceremonial law. To this Paul responds by telling them to stand fast in their liberty, and not be brought again into bondage (Galatians 5:1). And in verse 13 we are reminded that we may not use our liberty as “an occasion to the flesh,” that is, as a reason to seek themselves, and to violate the law.

The same apostle made this same point to the Romans: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6:1-2).

### **The Life of the Liberated Christian Young Person**

Young people, knowing that Jesus Christ has freed you from sin’s bondage and from the ceremonial law, how do you—and how should all Christians—live?

First, we not only obey God’s law, but delight in it: “Oh, how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97). We strive to perform this law from our heart, guarding our heart against sin: “I have inclined my heart to perform thy statutes alway, even unto the end” (Psalm 119:112). So we fight against sin, knowing that at times we are sorely tempted to sin. In our fight against sin, we both warn others against sin in a brotherly way, and fight sin in ourselves, “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5).

Second, we have our priorities right. Our life is one of service to God! We seek first God’s kingdom, with our time, energy, and finances (Matthew 6:33). We work hard at the job God has given us. We view recreation as important to refresh us for service to God, but not as the all important goal of life. We think of ourselves as pilgrims and strangers, traveling through this earth to heaven. We know our need for the Sabbath day to refresh our soul.

Third, we evaluate actions before doing them. Before buying a car, going on a date, organizing a party at our house, we examine why we want to do these things. Do we

believe that we are seeking to glorify God in doing these things, and in how we do them? Honestly answer the question: “Will God be pleased with my doing it (I Corinthians 10:31)?” Such prior evaluation of our actions keeps us from being impulsive, doing things without thinking, or doing anything that we think will make us happy.

Fourth, we are careful not to insist that everyone act and think like us in every respect. Our liberty in Christ means that in areas which are indifferent, each child of God will serve God differently. We do not call him “crazy” who does not like the food which is our personal favorite. When another does something which our conscience would not allow us to do, we do not immediately think that they are sinning or are inferior to us in sanctification, but we charitably consider that perhaps they are performing that action to God’s glory; especially we are so charitable when they are not in clear violation of any command. For they, too, shall give account of themselves to God (Romans 10:12-13).

This is how the free person lives! We must live this way, of course; God requires us to live as though we are free. Even more, we do live this way, in the power of God’s grace, and in thankfulness for the freedom we have in Christ.

### **The Threats to This Life**

Living such a life of freedom, the Christian young person is aware of threats to this life. Against the two main threats, Paul warns the Galatians.

The first is that of being entangled again with the yoke of bondage (verse 1), that is, the threat of making many rules to govern life in minute detail. We call this legalism.

One way legalism shows itself is by making rules about what one must do to be saved. Throughout church history, many have fallen into this error of trying to base our righteousness on our own deeds. The Pharisees were an example of this; and so were the false teachers in Galatia, who said the saints must be circumcised. The error is that of forgetting that Christ’s atoning work provided salvation for all God’s people, full and free.

Or, legalism might show itself by making rules about how one must show gratitude for salvation, or how the child of God ought to live to enjoy fellowship with God. Rules which go beyond the ten commandments, and beyond the teachings of Scripture, tend in this direction. A rule against owning TVs, or forbidding the use of the internet, for example, would be legalism. (Note: for your parents to prohibit such in their own home is not legalism; but for the church to prohibit any of her members to do such would be legalism). The error is that of forgetting that God gave his law to

prescribe exactly how he would have us live thankful lives, and that we must not pretend to know more than God how to live thankfully.

The second threat is that of using liberty for an occasion to the flesh (verse 13), that is, saying that we are free to live as we please, so denying in our life that we are really freed from the bondage to sin. This we call antinomism, or antinomianism, which literally means “against law.”

Antinomism shows itself by seeking self. An “occasion to the flesh” is an excuse to please oneself, by disobeying the law. Seeking self, one does not serve others in the body of Christ. Any idea that life is for me, that I can do entirely as I please, that I am not required to show gratitude to God or to serve others, is really antinomian.

These two threats to the life of liberty are always present in the church of Christ; Satan is always trying to draw us away from a life of freedom.

With these threats in mind, the apostle says: “Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.” Avoid the dangers; fight against the threats; and live the life of the freed child of God!

How can we guard against these threats? By walking in the Spirit—walking in accordance with God’s Word, out of a pure heart. So Paul tells the Galatians: “But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law” (verse 18). And he who walks in the Spirit brings forth the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (verse 22-23); and then notice: “against such there is no law.”

That is, these works are not forbidden! We are free to live in this way! And the Spirit gives us the power to do so.

Great blessings we enjoy in the way of standing fast in this liberty. Peace, with God! Joy, in God! Living in this liberty, we have no fear that God is angry with us. And what greater blessing can the sinner experience, than that of being assured that his sins are covered by Christ’s blood, that he is righteous by faith alone in Jesus Christ?

Young people, pray every day for grace to serve God in the freedom he has given you!