

*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1 ESV)*

Freedom is a weighty word, especially in this country, at this time of year. Americans toss around the word freedom as a slogan, we talk about fighting for freedoms, and we generally use the word as if we all knew what it meant. We don't though; free can mean a lot of things, everything from free speech to free beer.

Freedom is one of the greatest gifts of knowing Christ, and that's a theme that appears over and over again in Galatians. Paul insists that the gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free in a new and radical way, even setting us free from the Law. But we have to understand just what kind of freedom Paul is talking about. In some ways, I think it's easier for us to understand the freedom we have in Christ by contrasting it to false kinds of freedom that the World offers.

Let me give an extreme example of one idea of freedom. There was an odd news story back in 2012, about a Swiss woman named Anna Gut, who starved to death in her own home. She had undertaken an extreme fast, inspired by an eccentric New Age teacher, who claimed that human beings can achieve a kind of spiritual liberation, surviving only on some sort of spiritual energy without food or water. This philosophy is called Breatharianism, and it draws very loosely on some ideas in Yoga.

I did a little investigation and found there are a handful of prominent advocates of this particular brand of mysticism; some of them even have YouTube channels. There's a yogi in India who claims he hasn't eaten or even drunk water in 70 years. There's an Australian woman who makes similar claims, and there's even a documentary suggesting that this spiritual practice could potentially end world hunger. Not surprisingly, none of these practitioners have ever been able to prove their claims, and currently four people, including the woman I mentioned, have died following their advice.

Now, if all this sounds crazy, that's because it is. That's the point. All of these people are seeking a kind of freedom. They wanted to reach a point of total self-sufficiency, where they were free from any physical needs. The only problem, of course, is that it killed them. This is a search for freedom so extreme it would be comical if it weren't tragic.

It's highly unlikely that any of us sitting here are interested in trying to live without food or water; on the other hand, many of us are spiritually starving ourselves pursuing false ideas of freedom. We spend our time trying to live without the spiritual nourishment God freely offers us.

That's what Paul is getting at with his long list of "the works of the Flesh. His list includes "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." He even says "I

warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19-21).

Paul's point here isn't that God has provided us with a list of rules to follow and he will punish us if we fail. The point is that God has offered us himself, communion with him, life with him. In our Eucharistic prayer it says God made us for himself, and as Saint Augustine put it, our hearts are restless till they rest in God. Jesus Christ, living in us, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, is the Spiritual food we need, the only thing that can satisfy our deepest spiritual hunger.

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of good and evil, they thought they were seizing freedom, but their eating led to spiritual starvation, because they turned away from God, the source of their life. This is what sin does to us.

The world tells us that doing what we want is freedom and obedience to God is slavery. In fact, the world tells us that a number of these "works of the flesh" are the best things in life, that they are real freedom. The truth is just the opposite. Sin gives us the false freedom to do what we want right now, or avoid doing what we don't want, but it's only the false freedom that an addict has when they "choose" to shoot up, or take another drink. What starts as choice, as an exercise of freedom, quickly becomes slavery. Sin ultimately makes its own hell.

God's commands though, are all ultimately about love – the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7). It is the love that knits together the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the love that reconciles enemies. The fruit of walking in the Spirit is not slavery, but "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). It is the fulfilment of all our deepest longings.

This is what real freedom looks like, and it's the freedom Christ offers us. We are free from the bondage of sin and death, free from the fear of punishment, and free *for* the feast of that God the Father has prepared for us. Jesus tells us "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). We spend so much time choosing starvation, while Jesus is inviting us to his feast. This is a freedom the Law could never give us, the freedom to eat from the tree of life. The Law could tell us what to do and what not to do, but it couldn't change or satisfy our hearts. Only Jesus can do that.

Of course, we are free to decline Christ's offer, to try to be totally self-sufficient and pretend we can find rest somewhere else. We are free to continue following our own will instead of following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, just like we are free to try living without food and drink. Why would we though? Jesus offers us the freedom to be the people we were always meant to be, to be satisfied and be at rest, free from the prisons of our own making. Putting our whole trust in Jesus Christ, let's "walk by the Spirit... not gratifying the desires of the flesh" and taste Christ's feast.