

Freedom and Responsibility

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1 Corinthians 6:12-20

12 “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. 13 “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

## FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

I spend a lot of time thinking about a sermon title each week. The title gives direction to the sermon and hopefully grabs the attention of my listeners.

When I read this passage from First Corinthians, I thought that I had my title, Food and Fornication. Isn't that what this passage is all about, food and illicit sex?

Turn on the TV set and you'll get a steady dose of both. You have certainly come to the church of what's happening now today haven't you?

But, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you.

When it comes to the Bible our first impressions are often wrong. This passage is not primarily about food and fornication. Those topics are merely illustrations of a much more important and timely subject, Christian freedom and Christian responsibility.

That's the title of my sermon for today, freedom and responsibility.

Today's passage asks this important question: How can we use our freedom in a responsible way?

Now that might sound like a ho-hum subject, but the events of the past few weeks bring the importance of this issue into sharp focus.

Most of us know basically what happened. A French satirical magazine repeatedly depicted the prophet Mohammed in a way that was offensive. (And, by the way, this magazine also depicted Christianity and other religions in an offensive way as well.)

In response terrorists shot many of the magazine's leaders. There was an outpouring of sympathy from those around the world who decry such senseless violence.

The slogan of those supporters was:  
"Je suis Charlie."

I am Charlie. In other words when you attack freedom of the press, you attack me, and I'm going to stand against this.

All of us can sympathize that sentiment. An attack on free speech is an attack on us all. It is never right to kill someone over words. Even speech that is reprehensible should be protected.

A Belgian newspaper columnist and a Muslim suggested a better way to express that same sentiment.

He wrote this about the Muslim policeman, Ahmed Marabet who was killed trying to defend the staff at Charlie Hebdo,

"I am not Charlie. I am Ahmed, the dead cop. Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so."

What does it mean to be free?

Freedom is never freedom to do whatever strikes our fancy. Our freedom ends when what we want to do restricts the freedom of our neighbor.

In every society freedom comes with responsibility. Many of us remember the statement made by Oliver Wendell Holmes that free speech does not allow us to *falsely* shout fire in a crowded theater.

We must always be aware of how our freedom affects the lives of others. We cannot use our freedom as an excuse to harm others.

## CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

This is true in democratic countries, and this is also true in the church.

The Bible talks a lot about what it means to be free in Christ Jesus. Jesus said that we would know the truth and the truth would set us free. (John 8:32)

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that “freedom” was the whole point of our salvation, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1)

But, what does freedom mean in a Christian context? In our lesson for today Paul defines Christian freedom in this way,

*“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.* (1 Corinthians 6:12)

In other words, just because we can do something doesn't mean that we should do something. Our actions must be determined by what is beneficial to the body of Christ.

Indeed, sometimes the things that we “freely” choose can end up costing us our freedom. We can be dominated by our desires.

Paul emphasized that same point when he wrote in Galatians 5:13,

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence ...”

That’s an important point. There’s a difference between freedom and self-indulgence, a point that is lost on many in our society.

## MIXING THE OLD WITH THE NEW

Most of the early Christian churches were made up of Jews who had become followers of Jesus. These early Jewish believers had a lot in common with Jesus from the very beginning.

They didn’t have to be told to eat kosher food or refrain from sexual immorality. That was already a part of their faith commitment.

But, the church at Corinth was different. It was a church composed of people who grew up in a pagan environment. They regularly consumed meat that had been offered to idols and prostitution was an accepted as a way of life. Some even think that it was a part of their religious life.

When these Corinthians became Christians their lives had to change radically. And that was very hard to do since all around them people were embracing a lifestyle that was quite hostile to the Christian faith.

So, I guess that it should come as no surprise to us that some of the Corinthians began to slip back into their old way of life.

They just wanted to go along to get along. Some of them had begun to eat meat offered to idols and others had gone back to the temple prostitutes.

How could they justify this mixing of the old and the new religion?

In other parts of this same letter we learn the answer to that question. They justified their behavior by saying that they were more spiritual.

They had greater knowledge than the average person, and this allowed them the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do. They said that the body was going to be destroyed anyway so why not just wear it out with loose living.

## TWISTING THE SCRIPTURE

It's amazing how we can twist the words of Jesus so that Jesus says what we want him to say instead of what he really said.

Mark Achtemeier, a professor at Dubuque Seminary told of a student, "Joe" who was very evangelical. And when this student was home on Christmas break, he decided to practice witnessing for his faith in an unlikely place, the twenty-acre compound near his home that served as the national headquarters of the Aryan Nations.

As many of you know this is a notorious white supremacist hate group. But, this student thought,

"What place was more in need of the reconciling love of Jesus Christ?"

Joe managed to talk his way past the armed guard at the gate and eventually found himself sitting across the table from Richard Butler, the national leader of the Aryan Nations.

Joe opened the Bible and began explaining the gospel. Amazingly Butler listened politely to what Joe had to say.

And when Joe was through, Butler pulled out his own Bible. He opened it up and began reading selected passages.

He explained to Joe how these verses clearly showed that the Bible was the history of God's favored blessing upon the white race!

We might not do this so blatantly, but we all do this to some extent. We conveniently concentrate on some parts of the Biblical witness while ignoring others.

And that causes all of us to a greater or lesser extent to have a distorted view of the Scriptures.

Something like this had happened to the Corinthians.

I wonder if the Corinthians may have fallen prey to a particular theological error that Paul talked about in his letter to the Romans. In that letter Paul mentions those who “sin all the more” so that grace may abound. (Romans 6:1)

In other words some were saying in effect, “It doesn’t matter what we do. God will forgive us. God is in the forgiving business. In fact, the more we sin, the more God will forgive.”

### CALLED TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE

Paul rejected that argument of course. And in today’s lesson Paul insists that what we believe must also shape how we live.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, but don’t mistake forgiveness for approval. We are saved from our sin. We are not saved to settle down and get comfortable in our sin.

The Corinthians could not go back to their old way of life because in Christ Jesus they were new creations. Their old way of life didn’t fit with their new commitment and their new calling. Their freedom in Christ Jesus came with responsibility.

They were called in Christ Jesus to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They were called to flavor the ancient world by being different from the world. They were called to light up the ancient world by demonstrating a different lifestyle.

Of course, the same is true today.

We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and freed to live as His disciple.

What does that mean?

It means that we cannot buy into the mindset of a society that is still largely focused upon food and fornication.

The details have changed since the time of the early church. But the challenge remains the same.

How can we be in the world without being of the world?

In order to remain free, each and every day we have to choose to follow Jesus instead of following the ways of the world. We must learn to reject those things that would enslave us and harm others.

We must not let anything; even good things become so important that they dominate our lives.

## IDOLATRY

The definition of idolatry is taking a good gift that God has given us and making it into a false god. As Martin Luther put it in his Large Catechism:

"Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."

God has given us food and sex and money and material goods and pleasure and recreation. God has given us so many things.

And God has given us the freedom to enjoy those things.

But, none of those things are gods. None of those things are meant to dominate our lives.

As we saw with the crucifixion of Jesus, and as we saw in the actions of the terrorists in France, even religion can become a false God that dominates our lives and causes us to do things that are destructive.

In the Eagles song, Desparado there's a line that goes, "... these things that are pleasing you, hurt you somehow."

We all know that's true. We all know that our desires are out of whack.

We don't need the Eagles or even the Apostle Paul to tell us this. We know that it's true.

The question is this: How can we change? How can we keep our freedom from killing us?

## FREEDOM THROUGH SERVICE

Our lesson for today provides a clue. Paul told the Corinthians,

"... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

The only way to be free is to be God's servant.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. On the cross he died for our sins. He ransomed us. We have been "bought with a price."

And so we are his.

In that sense we are holy. God has called us for a special purpose. And everything in our life is measured by that yardstick.

It's not enough to say that we have the freedom to do something. We must also ask,

"Is this beneficial? Does this build others up? Does this bring glory to God? Does our action reflect the grace that we have received in Christ Jesus?"

## DISTRACTIONS

The Corinthians had become distracted from what they were called to do by the culture that surrounded them.

That happens to us as well. And we have many more distractions.

This past week I heard a story of a woman who knew that she was using her phone too much. So, she found an app for that!

This app told her how many times she was checking her phone each day. It turned out to be 854 times!

That might be some kind of record, but it illustrates the problem. We say that we own these electronic devices, but sometimes I wonder if the devices own us.

Yes, the modern cell phone is a wonderful tool, and I use it constantly. But, like everything else we have to ask if we are allowing this tool to dominate our lives.

Even at funerals I sometimes have to remind people. Please silence you cell phone.

That is a sign of a deep spiritual problem. In this case a device designed to foster communication can actually hinder effective communication.

It's no wonder that many people feel isolated and cut off. We tend to live in a virtual world instead of the real world.

There is no app for developing a spiritual life. Spirituality is a real world experience. And we grow in the Spirit by participating in the community of faith.

This is not an easy process.

Christian freedom is messy. Christian communities are messy. But, this is the place where the love of God in Christ becomes a lived reality.

This is where the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Our bodies are indeed a temple, and the Spirit of God can transform the mundane flesh into an instrument for the divine.

We help each other. We struggle. We pray. We forgive. We love one another even as God in Christ has first loved us.

We learn what it means to be truly free, even as we learn to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow Jesus.

Amen.