



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

**Sermon for Pentecost 3**

*June 26, 2022*

## Freedom to Serve **Galatians 5:1, 13–25**

<sup>1</sup> For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup> But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Freedom is perhaps the greatest byword in the history of our nation; it’s the very purpose behind our upcoming national celebration. In fact, it’s the reason for our existence as an independent country. Freedom is the inborn desire of every human being, and, according to the Declaration of Independence, it’s our inherent right. But, is it something we all truly want?

Isn’t it true that some people would rather be in bondage and have their needs provided by a benefactor than to be free and provide for themselves? To be a slave means to be beholding to another, which requires living under a set of rules, and rules, as much as we love to complain about them, make us feel safe, providing boundaries, and, to a certain extent, that’s a good thing. But, by their very nature, laws inhibit our personal liberties, and a proliferation of laws makes us increasingly less free. While some argue that this over-regulation is oppressive, others approve, and, like a swaddled infant, find comfort in tightly fitting strictures.

This, famously, was the case for a certain faction within that traveling mob of Israelites who criticized Moses for delivering them from slavery in Egypt, as they said, “to die in the desert.” They missed the three squares a day provided them by their



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taskmasters, so much so that they had apparently forgotten how they had been driven to hard labor at the point of a whip and that to the Egyptians their lives weren't worth the mud they were tramping in to make their allotment of bricks.

But, such is our human predilection for rules, even when those rules are unreasonable. How could the Egyptian slave masters think that their treatment of the Jews was okay? For that matter, how could German soldiers march countless Jewish men, women, and children to their death in concentration camps? Adolf Eichmann, one of the organizers of the holocaust, wrote in 1962, "We were only following orders." Is that answer acceptable? We have issues in our own history: American slavery; the treatment of the original inhabitants of North America, and then there is the modern holocaust of abortion, which has not ended, despite the laudable decision of the Supreme Court announced on Friday. Why is it that so many people seem to think that just because something is approved by the law of the land that it stands up to the Law of God?

The leaders of the church in Jerusalem were good men, men called by God, and yet, they had a bias when it came to the conversion of the Gentiles. Paul, earlier in this letter, mentions his confrontation with Peter on the issue of the Gentiles. Peter had joined the other leaders in Jerusalem in insisting that Gentile believers adhere to all the Laws of the Old Testament, just as the Jews did, and this included the men being circumcised. Paul objected on the basis that even the Jews couldn't abide by all the requirements of the Law and that we are all saved by grace through the atoning work of Christ, not by our keeping of the Law.

But, prone as we are to adhering to laws, and as enticing as it is to think of our salvation being attributed, at least in part, to our keeping of the Law, the Galatian Christians were beginning to fall prey to the errant teaching of the Jerusalem leadership. So, Paul had to remind them, as he does in our text, that we were not saved so that we could enter into the oppression of another set of laws. "For freedom Christ has set us free," he says, "stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Not only were these Gentile believers not required to earn salvation for themselves under the yoke of the Law, to the contrary, they were required to resist such a yoke being imposed on them. In Christ we are set free from the burden of the Law.

But, does this mean that the Law has become irrelevant? Not at all. The Law is absolutely relevant. But its requirements have been fulfilled in Christ; the penalty of the Law has been paid for us by Christ's suffering and death on our behalf. What, then, *is* the Law to us? And what bearing does it have on our lives?

Let me say, first of all, what the Law is not. It is not a prescription for how to make yourself a better person. Being a follower of Christ isn't about being better than you were, being better than the next guy, or being good enough to get God to like you. It's about being a sinner saved by grace. It's God who is good and He condescends to share His goodness with you. Be thankful for that. The Law is not a blueprint for gaining favor with God. You either have His favor or you don't. If you're a believer in Christ, you have it. If you're not, you don't. No amount of obedience to the Law is going to change that. The



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Law is not a bat to beat others over the head or a finger to point out other peoples' faults. They can't keep the Law any better than you can, and besides, you're nobody's judge. So, if you want to call out somebody's sin, call out your own and that will keep you busy enough.

The Law is, in the first place, a mirror; it shows us our sinful condition. Paul writes: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." You still reside in sinful flesh. As long as you're alive in this world, you will continue to struggle against its influence. But you are also alive in your spirit, made so by faith in Christ. As a living spirit, you also have the Holy Spirit residing within you, and when you attune yourself to Him, and the influence He brings to bear through Word and Sacrament, you will walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. But the struggle with the flesh will continue as long as you're in the flesh. You see this when you look into the mirror of the Law and see the inconsistencies with it that you exhibit in your flesh.

Secondly, the Law is a curb, a boundary. It sets limitations on what is permissible in society. Much as our contemporary society wants to ignore it, our civil laws are built on the Ten Commandments. Is it illegal to commit murder? Of course it is. Why? Because the Law of God is written on our hearts and we instinctively know that murder is wrong. Even in cannibalistic cultures, there are rules as to who you can eat and who you can't. Is it illegal to steal? Yes, it is. Why? Because the Law of God is written on our hearts and we instinctively know that it's wrong to take what doesn't belong to you. So, God's Law serves as a basis for all law, which curbs lawlessness in society. Even as believers, we need this function of the Law, because we don't always walk according to the Spirit, do we? It was Christians in Galatia that Paul cautioned against: "sexual immorality, impurity, indecency, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, rage, selfishness, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing,"<sup>1</sup> and the like. We need the reminder that these behaviors are unacceptable to God. One would hope that simply being a Christian would keep a person from adultery, but, sadly, we know that's not true, don't we. Idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, dissensions, and on and on . . . these sins walk among us, even as believers, even here at Trinity, even in your own family. Without the curb, without God setting a boundary, how much worse would things be?

Finally, the Law serves believers as a guide. The Gospel, not the Law, motivates us to want to please God. And why shouldn't it? We like pleasing those who do good to us. Who has done more good to us than God? No one. Think of all the gifts He's given and continues to give. If you're trying to find ways to express this, just think of Luther's explanations of the Creed in the Small Catechism. "God has made me and all creatures;

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<sup>1</sup> This wording is suggested by A. Andrew Das in his volume on Galatians of the Concordia Commentary.



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He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil.” “Jesus has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” “The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.” Why wouldn’t you want to please a God who has done all this? Of course you would!

The question is: How? What does it mean to please God? What does pleasing God look like? This we learn from the Law. Paul says, “The whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” We see this especially in the second table. Remember: the Commandments are not only prohibitions – you shall nots – they also have a positive side. Here’s where we see the Law serve as a guide. The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, for instance, prohibits murder, but it also enjoins us to help and support our neighbor in every physical need. The 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment forbids adultery, but directs us to lead a sexually pure and decent life and to love and honor our spouse. And so on it goes. The Gospel sets us free; the Law shows us how to use that freedom. “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” The Law shows you how to love and serve your neighbor, and therefore, how to love and serve God. And in following the guidance of the Law, we see the Spirit bearing His fruit in our lives: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” and so on.

Beloved, “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.” By faith, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has made you His own by the crucifixion of His flesh, which, in a moment, He will give to you again in His Holy Supper. May His Spirit, working through His powerful Means, grant you Grace to live as He lived: always for the sake of your neighbor. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen