

The Fulfillment of Freedom

by David H. Roper

Two hundred years ago today, as you know, our founding fathers put the finishing touches on Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence; having done so, Benjamin Harrison read it to the assembled General Congress and they decreed that it be printed and distributed and declared in the colonies. About a month later, they gathered to sign it and, as you know, John Hancock placed his rather flamboyant signature to the paper so that, as he said, John Bull could see it without putting on his spectacles. And Samuel Adams, who, like John Hancock, had a price on his head, also signed the document. As he did so, we are told, he stepped away from the table and said, "Men, we must all hang together." At that point, Benjamin Franklin is supposed to have said, "Yes, we must hang together or we will all certainly hang separately."

It was perhaps the most momentous occasion in our history, because it was that document that established, or at least restated, the basic right that we have--freedom from tyranny. That right was stated in the Declaration of Independence and it was obtained through the Revolutionary War. For 200 years we have been trying to figure out what to do with that freedom. And I am not sure that we know what we are supposed to do with it to this day.

Therefore, I thought it would be good for us, as Christians, to go back to the Scriptures and look at freedom as it is defined in the Scriptures and see how we, as the sons of God, are to live out our liberty in this nation of ours--particularly at what seems to me to be a very critical period in history. What should our behavior be? What should our attitudes be toward the freedoms that we enjoy in this nation? What can we do to secure a more righteous nation under God?

Galatians 5:13-6:10 gives us a number of principles which apply to this subject. Three stand out in my thinking. The first is that Paul makes it very clear in these chapters that the only absolute freedom is spiritual freedom. In chapter 5, verse 1, he says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery." All other freedoms are limited and relative. The only freedom that is absolute and authentic is the freedom that we have in Christ.

The founding fathers never believed that the Declaration of Independence would guarantee absolute freedom. As a matter of fact, when Thomas Jefferson wrote his original draft, he penned into that draft a statement reprobating the enslavement of the citizens of Africa because a number of the southern states were engaged in slave trade at that time. That particular line was stricken from the Declaration of Independence because some of the representatives of the southern states would not sign if that statement was left in. So even at that point of our history, freedom was limited. There were still people who were enslaved, and these men knew that no document could give any individual absolute freedom--no document. The only freedom that is absolute freedom is the freedom of the sons of God--the freedom that we have in Jesus Christ.

You will recall in John 8 a conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." Their response was, "We are the offspring of Abraham. We are in bondage to no one." Jesus said, "He who commits sin is a slave to sin and if the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed."

Jesus is saying that before we come to Christ, every one of us is enslaved by sin--by our moods, our drives to succeed, our ambitions, our passions, our habits--we are slaves of sin. And only the Son can set us free. No man can set us free. Thomas Jefferson couldn't, Abraham Lincoln couldn't, Jimmy Carter can't, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Henry Ford, whoever--no man can set us free. No human document can set us free--not the Bill of Rights, not the Magna Carta, not our Constitution, not the Declaration of Independence. The only one who can set us free is Jesus Christ, and until we come into a relationship with him, we don't know absolute freedom. Until then, we

have never been free a day in our lives.

The prophet Isaiah, predicting Jesus Christ, said, "He will preach good news to the afflicted, he will bind up the brokenhearted. He will proclaim liberation to the captives and set the prisoners free." There has never been anyone else in the world who has set anyone free, in the ultimate sense, except Jesus Christ. It is the sons of God who have freedom, and, therefore, it is that freedom that we ought to live and declare. That is the most strategic thing that we can do in our world today.

You may be called of God to be involved somehow in the political process, that is right and proper; but even there we all need to recognize that the prior message is the message of deliverance in Jesus Christ. It does not matter how much political freedom men have, if they are not related in a personal way to Jesus Christ, they are not free. And on the other hand, no matter how tyrannous a nation may become, if men within that nation are related to Jesus Christ, they are free. And no one can take that freedom from them. We may well come to a period of time in our own history when our freedoms are limited and abridged, but if we know and love Jesus Christ, then we are free. And no one can take that freedom from us. So we need to live out that freedom and we need to proclaim it.

The second thing that I see in this passage is that the freedom we enjoy is the freedom to serve God and not ourselves. This is contrary to much of secular thinking today, because twentieth century man thinks of freedom in terms of doing what he wants to do, doing what benefits him, living his life out without relationship to anyone--neither God nor man. Secular men think they are free if they are autonomous men--as Lou Rawles says, "to be a natural man." And yet that is not freedom.

Ironically, that is the worst sort of enslavement, because--though we are given every blessing and every potential, everything that belongs to us--like the prodigal son, before long, we take those things and use them for ourselves. We prostitute them on ourselves and on our own desires, and before long we are doing things not because we want to, but because we have to. And again we are enslaved.

Jesus put it this way, "If you want to find your life, lose it. If you want to lose your life, then find it." Jesus means that if we are living for ourselves, trying to discover who we are, thinking and living in terms of our own needs and the satisfaction of those needs and the indulgence of our own desires, we are enslaved. We are in the worst sort of bondage.

Therefore, the freedom of the sons of God is not the freedom to serve ourselves, but the freedom to serve God. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

The desires of the flesh are described for us in verses 19 and following:

...immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these...

Paul says, "All these things have been put away in Christ." We are no longer subject to them. We don't have to respond to them. We have, in Paul's words, been transplanted from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his Son. We have traded one sovereign for another. We have been taken out from under the sovereignty of sin and death and we have been placed under the sovereignty of God. We worship and serve him, and we are free.

The third thing that Paul tells us in this passage is that we are free to serve others. In chapter 5, verse 13, Paul writes,

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity

for the flesh [that is, don't use the freedom that you have in Christ to indulge yourself], **but through love serve one another.**

Real freedom is not the freedom to indulge yourself or exploit others. It is the freedom to give yourself in loving service to other people.

Paul does an interesting thing in this chapter. It is not obvious from our English translation, but from verse 25 on, he describes for us, first negatively and then positively, what true servanthood is. He tells us what it means to give ourselves in loving service. In chapter 5, verse 25, we read:

If we live [or since we live] **by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.**

If you look back at verse 16 in that chapter, Paul tells us that deliverance over the desires of the flesh comes as we walk in the Spirit. Now, the term that Paul uses in verse 16 is a general term for walking. It is much like our word for walk. It involves putting one foot ahead of the other. Our English word peripatetic comes from this particular Greek word. We refer to teachers who teach as they walk as peripatetic teachers. Socrates, as he walked the streets of Athens, taught peripatetically. That is the term used in verse 16.

But in verse 25, Paul uses a different Greek word and that difference is not obvious from our English translation. The Greek word translated "walk" here is a word that means to walk in rank or file, to walk together in the Spirit. Here Paul is talking about the corporate walk--the walk of the body of Christ together, instead of the individual walk which he described in verse 16.

Three years ago I was in Berea, Greece, with my good friend John Landrith. We were looking for a synagogue and we happened to pass by a school ground where there were a number of children playing. We watched them for a few moments and then the teacher came out and blew a whistle. All the children stopped. Then the teacher called out to them, "Stikesthe! Stikesthe!" which is the same Greek word that Paul uses here in verse 25. The children ran from all over the playground and lined up one after another. I thought, "What a beautiful illustration of this principle." This is what Paul is talking about. This is how we line up with one another. This is the way we walk in step, in unison with one another.

From this point, Paul begins to tell us how we can walk in unison together. And the undergirding principle throughout the rest of the passage is that of giving loving service. Basically, this walk is accomplished by being a servant, by giving yourself willingly to one another. That is what you are set free to do. Paul states the principle first negatively, in verse 26, and then positively, in chapter 6, verse 1, and the following. Verse 26:

Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Actually, what he says is, "Let's not be boastful with the result that we challenge and envy one another." The term "boastful" means to have an empty opinion of yourself, to think of yourself as more than you are. It means, basically, to be self-centered, to be preoccupied with yourself, your appearance, your clothes, your hair, what you do, the impression you make on others. This goes back to what Paul said earlier in chapter 5. This is the way of the flesh--to be preoccupied with yourself.

Paul says that if this is our preoccupation, it will issue in these two attitudes toward people. In other words, the way you look at yourself will determine the way you look at others and the way you react to them. And that attitude, preoccupation with self, will exhibit itself in challenging certain people and envying others.

Those we feel superior to, we will challenge. We will call them out because we want to prove our superiority, and we do it by being more witty, or more knowledgeable, or more interesting. We read Time Magazine and therefore everything is more interesting--even us--and we are going to demonstrate it. It pulls out of us this competitive spirit. I am better than you and I will show you. So we challenge one another.

On the other hand, if we feel inferior to people, the result is that we envy them. Isn't that true? We walk into a situation where we feel that we don't belong, we longingly look at other people who seem to have things together and we envy them. In both cases, we go away from that situation terribly depressed. If we have talked too much, we feel badly about it, and a little embarrassed. If we have been envious we start feeling sorry for ourselves, which always leads to depression. So it is not a very satisfactory situation.

Paul says, "Don't walk into a situation with vain glory, with an empty opinion of yourself. See yourself as God sees you-and God sees you as a servant." Therefore, you can walk into any circumstance and be a servant and you will have a place. You will make an impact. God will do something through your life. You won't have to prove anything.

In the following verses in chapter 6, Paul tells us in very specific terms what it means to be a servant. Instead of challenging one another, instead of envying one another, instead of acting and responding in a competitive way, he tells us what to do. This is wrapped up in three terms: verse 1, "restoring one another"; verse 2, "bearing one another's burdens; and verse 6, "sharing all good things with those who teach." Let's look first at chapter 6, verse 1:

Brethren, even if a man is caught In any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.

The first action that we ought to take as a servant is to be redemptive and restorative. How do you respond when you see someone who has been victimized by the enemy, someone who is down and out, someone who has been ensnared by Satan and has fallen into sin? Ted Wise once pointed out that Christians are the only people who tread on their wounded in battle. You see, the person who has fallen is not the enemy. He is the victim of the enemy. These people have been, to use Paul's term in 2 Timothy 2:26, "ensnared by Satan to do his will," and they need to be delivered, to be restored-not criticized, not ostracized, not rejected. They need to be loved and restored.

The term that is translated "restore" is the term that is used in medical literature today to describe the setting of bones, which is done gently, and is constructive and purposeful. "Restore" means to put back into place something that is out of place. Paul says that ought to be our action, considering ourselves lest we, too, be tempted. We are not to respond self-righteously; we are to recognize that we are prone to fall into the same sin and that next time someone may need to be involved in a restorative ministry in our lives. To restore those who have been victimized, to build them up, to encourage them, to put them back in a place of useful service where God wants them to be is a mutual ministry of all Christians. The first action of a servant is restorative.

The second is found in verses 2-5:

Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ [which is the law of love]. For If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting In regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load.

We are to bear one another's burdens. By so doing, we will fulfill the law of love. This assumes that God never intends any of us to bear the responsibility for living our lives in this world alone. There is a wonderful stick drawing at the top of this particular chapter in Good News for Modern Man that shows a number of figures, each carrying a sack over his shoulder with his left hand and with his right hand extended out in front to lift the burden of the person in front of him. That is the pattern. Paul says we do have our own burdens to bear. He says in verse 5:

For each one shall bear his own load.

There Paul is using the word that refers to a soldier's pack. This particular statement is placed in here to keep us from unloading all of our burdens on everyone. Paul is saying that all of us have certain responsibilities to bear. But in Christ God has given you the adequacy to bear them. But at the same time, there are crushing, unbearable

burdens that God gives to some people that they cannot bear alone. And therefore, we must help them to bear those burdens.

Verse 3 tells us the reason why we do not carry out that ministry. There are times that we feel that we wouldn't fall to our knees like someone else does. We wouldn't fail like that. It wouldn't crush us. And therefore, we withdraw from our brother or sister instead of helping them bear the burden.

Paul says, "If you think you are something, remember you are nothing". God will frequently bring something into your life that will prove to you that you don't have the strength to bear that burden. We have to recognize our mutual weakness. We need one another. As servants we need to bear one another's burdens, no matter how complicated a person's life may become, no matter what struggle he is involved in. We can have a part in bearing that burden and sharing with him the responsibility.

Finally, Paul says in verse 6:

And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.

There is no hierarchy in the church of Jesus Christ. Leaders have the same needs as those who are led. Those who teach struggle with the same areas, they have the same problems, they need to be ministered to. The same ministry that you carry out for one another, you need to carry out for your leaders as well. We need one another and therefore we are to share all good things with one another.

These are the three characteristics of a servant, according to Paul. We are to restore the fallen brother, we are to bear one another's burdens, and we are to share all good things with those who teach. Paul goes on to say in these following verses that to ignore these principles is to fall back into bondage.

He reminds us in verse 7 of what we have often referred to here as the law of inevitable consequences: You reap what you sow. God's character is inexorable. You cannot get away from his character. You cannot thumb your nose at God. Sooner or later your life will catch up with you. If you live your life for yourself and you serve yourself, and indulge yourself, the result will be loss. But if you give yourself to the life of service, the result will be gain. So Paul says in verses 7-9:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption [or moral decay---your life will begin to disintegrate], but the one who sows to the Spirit [in the context, sowing to the Spirit is ministering to the needs of your brother] shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.

Nothing makes you more weary than being a servant. It is discouraging. You don't always get the return that you expect. In fact, for some people, the only return will be the Lord's "Well done." People won't always recognize what you are doing. They won't appreciate you. Therefore, it is easy to grow weary and get tired and want to quit. Paul says, "You will reap if you don't get faint, if you don't give up-if you continue to pour out your life in loving service."

Paul concludes in verse 10:

So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Now this is Paul's definition of what it means to do good. If you have ever been a Boy Scout you know that you had to do a good turn every day. This good turn was always an undefined thing-it was difficult to know what your good turn for the day was. Paul tells us what it means to do good. Jesus went about doing good. What did he do? He went out serving. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and give his life as a ransom for many. And that is what we are called to do. We are to do good to all men, wherever needs exist-Christian, non-Christian,

Buddhist. It doesn't matter who they are, where they are, or what they believe. God wants us to serve and minister and love these people, and especially the household of God. The family comes first, but we are not to ignore secular man as well.

That is what we are called to be and that is why God set us free. Absolute freedom is the freedom that we enjoy in Jesus Christ. Paul said in the book of Romans that before we came to know Christ, we were free in regard to righteousness. That is, we could not be righteous. All we could do was sin, because even our best actions were tainted with self-centeredness. Paul says that now, in Christ, you are set free. But that is not a freedom to exploit your neighbor or indulge yourself. It is a freedom to love and serve God and love and serve your neighbor.

And that, I believe, is what God has called us to in our nation today. I am sure you all want to make some kind of impact on our nation. I do. And this is certainly a great time to begin. Well, how do we do that? As I said, earlier, God may call you to a level of governmental leadership, where you can exert your influence-but that is not true of all of us. What then can we do? We can proclaim the message that sets men free. That is true freedom. And secondly, we can live out our freedom in a world that is bound and enslaved. We can be God's men and women. We can exercise the freedom of the sons of God in the midst of the world. And we can serve others. We are free to do that. That is our privilege.

Two hundred years ago, the foundations were laid for the freedoms that we enjoy here in America; and we could well say that two thousand years ago the foundations were laid for the freedom that we enjoy as the sons of God. During this time of celebration-and there is much for which we can give thanks-we need to celebrate what is unquestionably the greatest fact of all-the fact that we experience the freedom of the sons of God.

Our Father, the Scriptures remind us that the one who called us is faithful and he will do it. We thank you for his faithfulness to us. As we look back to the past we can see that he is the one who set us free and continues to give us the capacity to walk as free men and women. We ask for the courage and the forthrightness coupled with the love to proclaim that message and to live it out. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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