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West Valley Presbyterian Church

Todd Misfeldt

Scripture: Galatians 5:1 and Acts 16:23–28.

- Tomorrow, on Monday, July 4th, we will celebrate the founding of our nation, the United States of America,
- the “land of the free and the home of the brave” according to the Star Spangled Banner. As Americans, we pride ourselves on being free. We are free to choose. No-one can tell us what to do.
- Today I want to talk about two aspects of freedom.
- The first aspect of freedom is what we as Americans are so proud of—the freedom to choose.
- Freedom to choose is a power idea. As teenagers, could we not wait to be free of our parents and their rules? Many of us could not wait to turn 18, become adults, and to be able to do whatever we wanted.
- However, once we turned 18 what happened? Was it all freedom without any consequences? Oh no.
 - Freedom to buy whatever we wanted didn’t release us from the responsibility of paying for it later or needing to earn the money we wanted to spend.
 - Freedom to stay up all night partying didn’t release us from the effects of our partying the next day.
 - Freedom is not being able to do as you want without consequences
 - It just means that there is no-one else to blame for our choices
- Our freedom in the United States is not the only freedom that we have. Christians believe that they can be in Jesus, that this is another freedom that Christians have.
- As Karen E just read, the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in the city of Galatia: Galatians 5:1:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.¹

- We are free in Christ! What good news. Hallelujah!!! My sermon is complete. Time for the benediction—right? Well not quite yet.
- Just as with the freedom we got when we turned 18, freedom in Christ does not mean that we get to do whatever we want. It does mean that we have the freedom to choose to

follow Jesus as our savior or to ignore Him. God has given us, for better or for worse, the freedom to choose.

- I stopped a little too soon when I read the passage from Galatians. Although the NIV translates Gal 5:1 as two sentences in English, it is one sentence in the original Greek. It reads:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.ⁱⁱ

Yoke of slavery? How can be both free and slaves?

- To answer that, consider the words of Black pastor and scholar Cheryl J. Sanders as she describes the lesson learned by slaves who were freed after the American Civil war. She says:

The freed slaves soon came to understand two dimensions of freedom—release from old securities and dependencies on the one hand, and taking on new risks and responsibilities on the other.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Just as when we turned 18 and shifted from legally being children to legally being adults, along with this new freedom came new responsibilities.
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- The same thing happens when we become followers of Jesus.
 - We are released from our old securities and dependencies
 - but then we become aware of the new risks and responsibilities that confront us.
- At this point is it easy to backslide and fall back into our old habits.
 - Perhaps that old habit is thinking poorly of our self. We are tempted to think that “Maybe I’m not good enough; I don’t deserve Jesus’ forgiveness.”
 - → No. We are now a child of God. We are good enough for Jesus to give His life for us.
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 - He has paid the debt for any failing that we might have had in the past. We are a brand new person. Leave that past behind. Embrace the future with Jesus.
 - [pause]
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- Perhaps an old habit is not feeling in control of your life. We think that it is too hard to resist our old ways. We want to go back into what was easy, the sin and slavery of our past.

- No! We do not need to walk alone through life.

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Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew—gospel means “good news”—
Matthew 11:28–30:

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,

for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus is with us. We turn our back upon the slavery of our past beliefs and habits with His help.

[pause]

- Perhaps that old habit is doubting that what Jesus said is true. We think that “perhaps heaven isn’t real so I have to get all the enjoyment out of this life that I can.”

- → No!

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- Heaven is as real as Jesus is. As a follower of Jesus, there is a place for us with Him for eternity. Jesus says in John’s Gospel 14:1–3:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.

My Father’s house has many rooms;

if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come back and take you to be with me

that you also may be where I am.”

[pause]

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- Perhaps instead of thinking that we can't help ourselves we think too much of our ability and that we can do it ourselves! I might be guilty of this one at times. We think that we can do it all. Even hold on to Christ by our own efforts.
 - No! We can't do it all ourselves.
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 - We must not look only to our own abilities, but we must look to Jesus alone, to His sacrifice, and to the grace of God.
 - Charles Spurgeon, 19th Century English Pastor, wrote:

Remember, therefore, it is not *your hold* of Christ that saves you—it is Christ; it is not *your joy* in Christ that saves you—it is Christ;

it is not even faith in Christ, though that be the instrument—it is Christ's blood and merits;

therefore, look not so much to your hand with which you are grasping Christ, as to Christ;

look not to your hope, but to Jesus, the source of your hope;

look not to your faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings;

it is what *Jesus* is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul.^{iv,v}

[Pause]

- I'm reminded of a classic movie plot device called "Deus ex machina" or "god from the machine" whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly resolved by an unexpected event or character. It goes something like this, one of the characters has fallen over a cliff but at the last moment they grabbed on to a small bush—just barely holding on. Their grip begins to slip. In the plot device, the person can't hold on and they are just about to fall to their death when their savior reaches out and grabs their arms. With this new strength, the character is saved.
- Doesn't this describe us when we try to do all ourselves. We are like that person, hanging on for dear life. We are trying to hold to Jesus by just our own strength. We can do it for a little while, but to be saved we need the arm of Christ to reach down and to pull us up.
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- Spurgeon’s point is that we don’t hold on to Christ. Christ holds on to us. We must reach out to Christ—not to take His hand—but for Him to take our hand.

Remember, therefore, it is not *your hold* of Christ that saves you—it is Christ;

That is good news friends. We don’t have to do it all. We just need to believe and accept Christ.

[pause]

- We see that we can be burdened by slavery toward our old ways. But Jesus helps us with those burdens if we ask Him and in my experience, they become less and less over time until they fade away.
- Paul writes in Galatians 1:4 of what Christ did for us: It was Christ:
⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.
- In 5:16 Paul continues and says:
¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

The desires of the flesh will take us back into slavery are what we leave behind when we look to Jesus as our Savior.

- A second aspect of our freedom in Christ is that it doesn’t mean that we are free from oppression.
- To illustrate this, I want to examine the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that Karen just read. As you heard, Acts 16:23–28 recounts one of the many times that the Apostle Paul was thrown into prison for witnessing about Christ.
- ²³ After they (Paul and his companion Silas) had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison (in Philippi), and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.
²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

“We are all here.” Not what you expected was it. You would expect, like the jailer, that all the prisoners would be gone.

- On the one hand, Paul and Silas were prisoners in this passage—right? They were beaten, thrown in jail and put in chains.
- Are Paul and Silas free? Physically there were in chains and not free, but were they free emotionally and spiritually? Verse 25 says “²⁵ About midnight **Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.**” Yes, it sounds as if they were free. I would dare to say that they were free in Christ.
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- Their bodies were bound in chains and they were in a prison yet they were free, free in Christ.
- There is a lesson here for all of us. If we feel bound by the limits of our body or circumstances, this passage tells us that we can be “Free in Christ” no matter our situation. Your freedom begins in your mind and heart in Christ.

- Black theologian James H. Cone writes from the perspective of a people who have been literally in slavery. He says:
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- “Only the oppressed are truly free!”^{vi}
- Cone points to the example of Israel’s experience with freedom. He says
 - “The relationship between freedom and suffering is also evident in the biblical tradition. The election of Israel is a call to share in Yahweh's liberation. It is not a position of privilege but of terrible responsibility.”^{vii}
- Ironically being free does not mean being free from oppression. When we are free in Christ it does not mean that we are free from the temptation of sin, the ridicule of non-believers around us or from attacks from the devil.
- However, when we choose Christ, just like Paul and Silas in prison, our minds, hearts and souls are free no matter the location of our bodies or our situation.

- Back in 1776, the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence knew that they were taking a great risk. If their efforts failed, King George would not overlook kindly upon their efforts. Despite that, they freely took the risk.
- When we accept Jesus, we freely choose Him and we may feel some risk because it is change from who we were before.

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- James H. Cone^{viii} says: [Being free means that the only real choice is risking all.](#)^{ix}
- I acknowledge that we may be afraid of risk. The certainty of the way things are now may be very comforting and the thought of something new is scary. That is where faith comes into the picture.
 - It is our faith in Christ that will carry us through any doubt and any unease. I know that it is worth it.
- Remember, we are not alone. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13:

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
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- Risk it all with Jesus. Turn your back upon your old ways and keep your eyes upon Jesus. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians 3:13–14:

[But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.](#)^x

 - What is the prize that Paul is speaking of?
 - It is spending eternity, our life after this world, with Christ. This is with the same Christ who has set us free from the bondage of sin and death with His sacrifice upon the cross and His resurrection.
- This is prize that we must risk everything for, and strive for through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - If you have never “Risked it all for Jesus,” commit yourself to that risk now.
 - If you have slipped back into the slavery of the past, turn your eyes to Jesus and focus upon Him.
 - If you are trying to do it all yourself, turn your focus to Jesus and let Him take your hand.
- The author of the Book of Hebrews writes in 12:1-2

[Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.](#)
- Jesus IS the perfecter of our faith and we are truly free in Him.

Let us pray.

- Dear Jesus
- You paid the price so that we could be free to choose life with you over slavery to our past lives of desire, selfishness, disappointment, and isolation.
- We freely choose to have faith. We choose to place our trust in you. We choose to follow you with our whole heart, body, and soul.
- The Bible tells us that You will not disappoint. You will not abandon us. You will love us.
- If we focus upon You, You will help us with our burdens, and lead us to the place that you have prepared for us where we can be with You forever.
- As we celebrate the freedom of our nation, we remember the freedom that we have in Christ.
- We thank you for Your loving grace that enables us to seize a hold of You and to never let go.
- Bless you Jesus. Thank you Jesus. Be all glory and honor to You Jesus.
- Amen.

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Sources

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- i *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ga 5:1.
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- iii Cheryl Jeanne Sanders, *Empowerment ethics for a liberated people : a path to African American social transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 21.
- iv Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (Complete and unabridged; New modern edition.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), June 28 PM.
- v My modernization of the English: thee and thou to you and your.
- vi James H. Cone, *A Black theology of liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 87.
- vii Ibid., 100.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Ibid., 88.
- x *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Php 3:12–14.