**“True Freedom”**

**Galatians 5:1, 13-17, 22-25**

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Mark Twain once said, *“Patriotism is supporting your* ***country*** *all the time, and your* ***government*** *when it deserves it.”*

In a similar way, singer and song-writer, Emmylou Harris, said, *“Patriotism can be good or bad.* ***Knee-jerk patriotism can be very bad****. I'm patriotic almost to the point of self-consciousness, but I love my country the way I love a friend or a child* ***who I would correct if she was going the wrong way. Who I expect the very best from.”***

Eleanor Roosevelt said, *“religious freedom cannot just mean Protestant freedom; it must be freedom of all religious people.”*

She also said, *“freedom makes* ***a huge requirement*** *of every human being. With freedom comes* ***responsibility.*** *For the person who is unwilling to grow up, the person who does not want to carry his (or her) own weight, this is a frightening prospect.”*

And former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, said, *“The magic of America is* ***that we're a free and open society with a mixed population****. Part of our security is our* ***freedom.****”*

Patriotism. Freedom. Liberty. Strength in Diversity.

I share these quotes with you because we Americans celebrate ***freedom*** as a national right and immortalize its twin sister ***libert****y* in the glorious statue that many of our ancestors saw as they came to this country.

Reflecting on these truths, the Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler, Associate Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Richmond, said:

*“For me, the great-great grandson of enslaved Africans, freedom is a cherished gift long withheld from those in my familial lineage. It is a goal long sought by my ancestors, one attained only at the high cost of shed blood and spent lives. It is a goal that echoes in the rich baritone of Martin Luther King Jr., who pleaded with our nation to “let freedom ring” for those who have been denied this right.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Interestingly, *the quest for freedom* also arises in Paul’s epistles as a paramount end. It is characterized by his exhortation in Galatians 5:1: *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* Americans steeped in the ***freedom tradition*** may read this epistle and conflate Paul’s emphasis *with our national obsession*; **but could it be that we wrongly assume a connection between these concepts?**

Certainly Paul’s concern has to do with *being freed from constraints* that had been burdensome and oppressive. The freedom he sought was *liberation from* a legal system that infringed upon personal liberties, creating a *bondage* to the law, so to speak. The forms of bondage from which Paul sought to escape were *ethnically sensitive* and *prescribed* certain restrictions and benefits for some *(Jews)* while imposing no obligation on others *(gentiles).*

In fact, Paul’s total commitment to freedom ***as a gift*** resounds in the ears of we U.S. citizens who descend from those who sought freedom, whether it was from *a foreign or a domestic force*, and whether it was gained through *immigration* or *emancipation.*

Freedom, of course, is a core value grounded in the ideals of *the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution;* yet the concept evolved through time. These days freedom seems to mean *“freedom” from obligation to anything beyond us.* And *freedom of speech* has come to mean that we can say whatever we feel, no matter if it is right or kind or even fair—without threat of reprisals.

Moreover, the Klan has employed the right to *freedom of assembly* for more than a century to legitimate its rallies celebrating their hatred of and terrorist activities toward African Americans, Jewish Americans and Latino immigrants.

And sometimes *freedom* seems to mean *compromising our ethics and values* for the sake of doing what feels good; we justify our vices by saying, *“I’m grown. I’m free to do whatever I want as long as I don’t hurt anybody.”* The latter part of that statement, however, is often compromised for the sake of the former. *We cite freedom to legitimize bad behavior.*

But is this the freedom that Paul sought?

No. Paul’s view of freedom should in no way be confused with our own.

Paul, you see, spoke of freedom *from the law*— release not just from a law thought to be burdensome, *but from a law that had proven ultimately ineffective for establishing right relationship with God.* ***Freedom from the law*** meant *liberation from* the ethnic boundary markers that prohibited true fellowship between gentiles and Jews in Christ (3:23-29). Paul advocated a freedom that provided all Christians with the opportunity to worship God sincerely in *common fellowship.*

Unlike American freedom, *Christian freedom* is not about personal liberty; Christian freedom comes with an undeniable sense of obligation and servitude, and complete submission to God and to Christ Jesus.

Hence, Paul identifies himself as *“a servant of Christ”* (1:10).

Paul’s sense of freedom, then, is *not* a transcendence of ***obligation*** to God. Instead, he says, we are freed from the power of the law, sin and death *in order to fully submit to God and to fulfill God’s will as a slave of Christ.* Freedom from the law ***obligates us*** to God in Christ Jesus.

*Christian freedom,* you see, was never intended to be *freedom from responsibility to others.* In Galatians 5:13 Paul exhorts his audience: *“Through love become slaves to one another.”* Paul is advocating *not* a sense of self-indulgence, *not* just a *“freedom from”;* the freedom we receive in Christ is a *“freedom to”* commit ourselves fully to each other. We are now *subject to* a new law, Christ’s law. In Galatians 6:2 Paul tells us: *“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”* We are called to be *slaves* to our sisters and brothers, placing their needs above our own. We are called to the freedom of Christ, who in the garden chose God’s will instead of his own.

I want you to think about these things with regard to the rise of *nationalism* in all of the Western democracies in recent years—there is some overlap in the ideas of patriotism and nationalism. For example, we define *patriotism* as *“love for or devotion to one’s country”* and nationalism in part as *“loyalty and devotion to a nation.”*

But the definition of *nationalism* also includes *“exalting* ***one nation*** *above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations ….”* This *exclusionary* aspect is not shared by *patriotism*. And this is why it so problematic. Patriotism (rightly understood) *includes*; nationalism *excludes*.

What is driving the rise of *nationalism* in the Western democracies?

Primarily the influx of refugees—refugees who are of a different *ethnicity, race,* and sometimes *religion* from the dominant cultures. According to a recent report from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in its *Global Trends* report on the global refugee crisis, the world's forcibly displaced population is currently at a *"record high."*

Half of the world’s forcibly displaced are *children* and the 2018 total is the highest in nearly 70 years.

But the global figure, which comprises 25.9 million refugees, 41.3 million people uprooted within their homelands, and 3.5 million asylum-seekers, is “conservative”, it said.

According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi, *“When you say Europe has a refugee emergency, or the United States, or Australia – no. Most of the refugees are in fact in the country next to where the war is, and unfortunately that means mostly in poor countries or in middle-income countries.”*

“That’s where the crisis is, that’s where we need to focus,” he told a news briefing.

More than two-thirds of the world’s refugees come from five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia, the report said.

Central Americans *(most of whom are Christians)* reaching the United States after fleeing violence or persecution in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are entitled to request asylum, Grandi said.

The United States should give such people a fair hearing and not separate children from their parents, he said, adding that his agency stood ready to help US authorities deal with the challenge.

With 254,300 asylum claims lodged in 2018, the United States is the world’s largest recipient of applications, the report said.

But Grandi said the United States has a huge backlog of 800,000 cases to be processed and that his agency was also helping Mexico to beef up its capacity to handle asylum-seekers.

“*This is the crisis of solidarity that I have mentioned. It is identifying refugees and migrants with a problem instead of people that are fleeing* ***from a problem****,”* he said.

*In Europe,* (as in the United States) *the issue has been heavily politicized, leaving some governments “terrified” to commit to take in people rescued at sea after fleeing Libya or other conflict zones,”* Grandi said.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As Madeline Albright has also said in regard to this situation: *“There is a significant moral difference between a person who commits a violent crime and a person who tries to cross a border illegally in order to put food on the family table. Such migrants may violate our laws against illicit entry, but if that's all they do they are trespassers, not criminals. They deserve to have their dignity respected.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Friends, as we approach the day of *symbolic celebration of our national freedom*, I commend to you the notion of *Christian freedom*. This freedom makes no space for *myopic egocentrism* but is a radical submission to God and humanity that forsakes *personal gratification* in order to fulfill God’s calling in our lives. As Martin Luther notes in “On Christian Freedom,” *“A Christian person is the most* ***free*** *lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian person is the most* ***dutiful servant*** *of all, and* ***subject to everyone****.”*

May Christian freedom be our ideal this Independence Day.

1. Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., *“Alternative Freedom, Galatians, 5:1-26,”* The Christian Century, June 12, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reuters, *“Poor Nations hosting Most Refugees Worldwide; Need more Western Help,”* June 19, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Madeleine Albright, [Memo to the President Elect: How We Can Restore America's Reputation and Leadership](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1145285) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)