

“Christian Freedom”

a sermon by

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Text: “For freedom Christ has set us free: stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

David Brooks recently wrote an article in *The New York Times* entitled “In Search of Dignity.” In it he noted that George Washington, the first President of the United States, when he was a young man, copied out a list of 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and in Conversation.” Some of these rules dealt with the niceties of going to a dinner party or meeting someone on the street. “Lean not upon anyone,” was one of the rules. “Read no letter, books or papers in company,” was another. “If anyone comes to speak to you while you are sitting, stand up,” was a third.

As his biographer Richard Brookhiser has noted, these rules were not just tips on etiquette. There were designed to improve inner morals by shaping the outer person. Washington took them very seriously. He worked hard to follow them, and throughout his life he remained conscious of his own rectitude.

In doing so, as Brooks points out, he turned himself into a new kind of hero. He wasn’t a military or political hero. He became a great man by the way he conducted his moral life. He followed what some have called a “dignity code.”

This dignity code has not survived into modern life. The costs of its demise are evident all around us. Over the past several weeks we have seen a number of incidents when it has become evident that this code is no longer binding in our society.

The first was the press conference of Mark Sanford, the Governor of South Carolina. Here was an individual who had engaged in a dereliction of duty by abandoning his office as governor without informing anyone of his whereabouts. When he revealed that he was visiting his mistress in Argentina, he engaged in a rambling self-exposure that compounded his misdeeds.

The second event was the press conference of the Governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin. Once again, the American public was treated to a rambling exercise in self-indulgence. Here again is a person who aspires to a high public role, but is unfamiliar with the traits of poise and constancy that are the sources of authority and trust.

The third incident was the outpouring of grief and interest in the death of Michael Jackson. Now, Michael Jackson was a talented composer, singer, and dancer without doubt. But in more recent years, he led a lifestyle that was bizarre and untouched by any of the rules and restraints of adulthood. Even the President of the United States noted that there was far more attention given to the death of a pop star than to the effort to reduce the number of nuclear weapons possessed by Russia and the United States.

I.

In Paul's letter to the church at Galatia there is a remarkable section where Paul addresses the issue of Christian freedom. There is no doubt that this issue was a critical one in the life of the early church. There were individuals in the church in Galatia that argued that in order to be a Christian, a person had to obey the strict rules of Judaism, including circumcision and the dietary rules of the Old Testament.

The Apostle Paul addresses the issue of Christian freedom in a powerful way. In Galatians, chapter five, he sums up his understanding of this important subject when he writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1).

Paul is adamant on this subject. Salvation comes by grace through faith. It does not come to any us by following the law. It is not something we earn. It is something given to us through the death of Jesus Christ.

In 1520, the Reformer Martin Luther wrote an essay he entitled "The Freedom of the Christian Man." In this essay, Luther wrote in opposition to many of the practices of the medieval church, including the system of indulgences, pilgrimages, and other activities that were supposed to gain people merit with God.

Luther begins his essay with a remarkable statement. "The Christian," writes Luther "is lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is servant of all, master to none." For Luther the Christian life was a life of joy made free by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. For him Christians should be free from the burdens of religion in order to serve God with joy and without restraint.

Throughout the years the church has always struggled with this notion of freedom. For some, the Christian faith is a matter of following certain rules. Many people characterize Christianity as a set of rules that must be followed. Many of us who grew up in the south remember that there were strict rules governing what people could do on the Sabbath (Sunday). Today, I suspect few families even understand a concept of the Sabbath.

There have been times as well when the church has tried to define the church in terms of beliefs. The Fundamentalist Controversy of the early 20th Century centered on the notion that

there were certain doctrines that were fundamental to the faith and that anyone who did not believe these, was essentially not a Christian.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that that they were attempts to define Christianity in terms of things other than the righteousness that comes to us by faith in Jesus Christ.

We are not immune from this today. There are groups on the “right” and on the “left” that are determined to define Christianity in terms of certain positions on certain issues like “homosexuality,” “abortion,” and “stem cell research,” just to name a few.

One of the tenements to the Reformed faith is that God alone is the Lord of Conscience. Laws that bind the conscience must be distinguished from civil and ecclesiastic regulations, which order life in the church and in society. John Calvin’s insistence on the freedom of the conscience was bound to his belief that in terms of our salvation, no civil or ecclesiastical body can impose its scruples on any individual. God alone has ordained what is necessary for salvation and what is necessary for the well-being of human beings.

This past weekend we celebrated “Independence Day” – the Fourth of July. That is an occasion when we recognize and give thanks for the freedoms that are granted to us in our citizenship in this country.

Today we are speaking about a different kind of freedom – the freedom that belongs to all of us as Christians to worship and serve God without the impositions of religious or governmental institutions. Paul is very clear about this: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:10)

So let us be clear. There is a certain freedom that is granted to us as Christians that cannot be taken away. But that freedom, like every privilege, carries with it certain responsibilities.

II.

The first responsibility is to our neighbor. Christian freedom must also be concerned about the neighbor. One of the controversies in the early church had to do with “meat that had been offered to idols.” (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8) In cities like Corinth and Ephesus there were a number of pagan temples that sacrificed animals to these idols. The question for the Christian community was whether it was right to eat this meat. Now, there was nothing unsafe about this meat. However, some Christians thought it was improper to eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. Paul understood that this was a matter of Christian freedom.

Paul understood the importance of the concern for neighbor, even at the risk of losing one’s influence. “If meat causes my brother to stumble,” Paul said on one occasion, “then I will not eat meat.”

There is something very important at stake here. Just because we have the freedom to do something, doesn’t mean that we have to do it. Take, for example the use of alcoholic beverages. There is no divine or scriptural prohibition against drinking alcoholic beverages. It is part of Christian freedom. Yet, having said that, it is also true that the abuse of alcohol constitutes one of the most serious drug problems in our society. There are many people who are able to consume

alcoholic beverages with no adverse affects. There are others, however, for alcohol is highly addictive. So the question for the Christian is to balance a freedom with a responsibility to those who may struggle with this problem.

This past Friday marked the 500th anniversary of the birth date of the Reformer John Calvin. One of the aspects of Calvin's writings is his concern for what he called "things indifferent." He called them "adiaphorous." There were certain things he was convinced that simply didn't matter. I suspect that most of us today would agree that some of the things that Christians used to be much excited about like card playing, dancing, or going to the movies on Sunday are really matters of indifference.

But, this should not obscure something very important. Our freedom must be carefully guarded, particularly, in order that we not abuse God's gifts. Calvin understood in his own city of Geneva that if the rich were to live lavishly, the poor would starve. For that reason Christian freedom is something that is not to be abused.

III.

The second aspect of Christian freedom has to do with how we conduct our own personal lives. I spoke earlier about the "dignity code" that seems sadly lacking in our contemporary society. The rules that guided George Washington and many generations since are, for the most part, now gone.

As David Brooks points out, there are a number of reasons for this decline in personal dignity. One is a legacy of unbridled capitalism that encourages people to reinvent themselves, engage in self-promotion, and to broadcast their own talents. Second, there is a cult of naturalism that encourages people to discard all artifices and repressions and to liberate their own feelings. Third, there is charismatic evangelism with its penchant for public confession. A fourth factor is the radical egalitarianism of our times that is hostile to any form of elitism and to aristocratic manners.

The cost of the demise of the code of dignity is very hard to measure. But it is costly. For example, the important work of the United Way of Charlotte has been undermined by the issues concerning the compensation of a former executive director. More recently, someone shared with me an article in the *New York Times* concerning a controversy that has surrounded the Riverside Church in New York City. Nine months ago, the Riverside Church hired a new minister who was given an annual compensation package valued between \$500,000 and \$700,000. The question of compensation became such a divisive issue that the minister has just resigned after less than a year in office. A lot has been said about corporate greed but greed is not limited to corporate America. It rears its ugly head in many places. In the case of the Riverside Church it has become an issue that has divided the church and will no doubt take a heavy toll on a very important Christian institution.

As Christians, we must value the freedom that is given to us in Jesus Christ. But freedom is a very precious gift and all of us should strive in our public and in our private lives to refrain from violating this precious gift.

Amen!