

"THE CHOICES"

Text: Galatians 5:1-14

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who called you. A little yeast leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case, the stumbling-block of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! For you were called to freedom, brethren, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Galatians 5:1-14

I think it is true that freedom is not lost as often because of outward pressures such as political tyranny as it is from inward bad choices.

"But Man by making bad choices lost both himself and his freedom."

John Calvin.

What are some of the bad choices that destroy our freedom?

When I go against truth I lose my freedom. This is a premium and first principle and it permits no exceptions. Several years ago when we lived in Seattle, I was a member of a civic club in the University District of Seattle. One year several business leaders in our district gathered local support from our club and others to finance the building of a hydroplane which was built to compete in the Seafair Races on Lake Washington, one of the biggest sporting events in the United States. Our hydroplane appropriately named "Miss University District," was to mount a more powerful engine than the other entries, and the promoters were enthusiastic about the speeds that this vessel would achieve. The story is very humiliating because on the very first day "Miss University District" went to the water, she developed about eighty miles per hour and then completely disintegrated and went to her resting place on the bottom of Lake Washington. Experts later explained to us that the boat had been constructed

in defiance of certain basic hydrodynamic laws so that the wooden hull could not take the speed which the engine was capable of producing. Put in a philosophical way, the power potential was not able to achieve its full freedom because the design had gone against truth.

A lot of us are like this - "all dressed up with nowhere to go." We are talented, highly powered, but because at one or various points we break with integrity, we are not able to achieve what might have been our destiny. Take, for example, the political leader who takes a bribe and from that instant forward is not a free man able to make unilateral decisions, or the athlete who defies tested principles of his event and fails to achieve the distance that he might have been capable of had he not broken training. Or, the scientist who makes a simple mistake in the addition of numbers and wastes his whole experiment. There is an unwavering requirement to be and to stay free, whether in morals or in science. I dare not break with truth if I want to be free. Where an individual makes the bad choice, either deliberately or carelessly, to ignore integrity, truth, justice, he has then locked up both himself and his future moves within as real a concentration camp as barbed wire ever enclosed.

There is a second bad choice against freedom too; when I seek to possess freedom as if it were a gift for me alone, I lose it. If I have an interpretation of freedom that insists upon my own right to free movement, but in my exercise of freedom I reject the same right to those around me, then I have made a bad choice. Sooner or later, such a style of freedom will inwardly collapse. What I am saying is this: Freedom is a value which is spoiled by selfishness. Freedom is like happiness and love; not one of these three can be hoarded, owned or compelled. There are values in life which can be possessed: our past achievements are in a definite sense our own; traditions are possessions and very important ones at that; heroic moments of the past are part of our property, but love, happiness, freedom, are far different values. They do not yield to ownership but have the kind of inner dynamism that is too powerful to be scheduled, compelled, owned, programmed, arranged or hidden. Freedom, like love and happiness, will not stay put. We cannot arrange for it to appear at command. "This next Tuesday I plan to be happy, or free, or to love..."

Freedom is a value that I prove is mine in the sharing of it. If I am a liberating kind of person in human relationships who enables those around me to be free, then it is that freedom within my life has been proved. Brilliant descriptions or defiant demonstrations of independent behavior are not as eloquent as the basic kind of person who lives in such a way that others around him are endorsed and encouraged to be free in the authentic sense.

A third bad choice is more subtle; when I only half read the meaning of freedom, I usually lose it. In this case, I may experience one half of the total truth but stop midway and because of the hesitation to embrace the whole meaning of freedom, even the part that I first won is lost.

There are two decisive movements in freedom, and they can be dramatically characterized with two prepositions: "from" and "to." Freedom is twofold: it is the right to be free from bondage, from hunger, from myself, from others, from coercion, so that I am free in the right of decision-making. But, freedom is a second right as well; it is the right to move, to serve, to act, to decide, to do. Therefore, freedom is both a negative and a positive value with both movements held together in dynamic tension. It is never one alone, and, therefore, to half read freedom is to lose it.

I remember a young lad in my church in Seattle who was as fine a water skier as I had ever seen for his age. One day while coming in, he misjudged the bank and hit it at full speed, breaking both of his legs in the accident. For awhile, the doctors were battling for his life because of shock that resulted from the compound fractures. I visited the young man and watched his recovery through the various stages. First, there was the movement from the grave danger to his very life; then the movement was from broken legs to satisfactory healing so that he could walk and with two legs of exactly the same length. But, in the heart of this young man, he would not be well until he could ski again. This illustrates the journey toward authentic freedom. Not only to be free from unconsciousness, to be free from the trauma of the compound fractures, to be free from the wheelchair, but to be free to walk again, and not only that possibility, but free to run again and to ski, and, if possible, to do all you are destined for. Everyday we meet people who only half read the meaning of freedom. They are at a stage in the journey but for some reason roadblocked and willing to settle for half of the gift. They have succeeded in turning freedom into a negative rather than a positive value. This roadblocked interpretation of freedom has been popularized in our generation with flawless precision in James Bond Agent 007. He is a modern "gothic" example of negative freedom. Bond is serenely independent of all interpersonal obligations; he is free from everything and everyone; even his technical advisor to whom he owes so much for providing him with the special Austin and special underwater devices, etc., even this man means nothing to Bond and is treated with majestic contempt. Bond is passionate and lusty toward women, but he feels absolutely no obligation to any of them. In one recent film he is dancing with a girl who is shot in the back, and Bond seats her by an unsuspecting couple at a table with the witty remark: "May my partner sit here for a while--she is absolutely dead." She was too, and Bond is so free of people that he does not stay to find out. This fictional agent has polished to a fine art what has become a modern trend in the understanding of freedom. Many people today are sure that to be free means to be free from obligation, from people, from God. This definition of liberty is caustic and superficial because it is essentially negative. Freedom that is half read turns out to be a bad choice.

It should be obvious by now that freedom must have its own way or it is lost--to us. Freedom is an outward spiral that moves from rights and privileges toward obligation and service; from slavery to responsibility.