

The Christian Faith: One Word at a Time
 “Christian Freedom: a Gift and a Responsibility”

In the name of Christ Jesus, who died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

Today we bring to a close our summer-long sermon series, walking through the book of Romans, learning of God’s wonders – One Word at a Time. At the beginning back in June, perhaps it seemed like a daunting task, but we did it. As the old joke goes, how do you eat an elephant – one bite at a time.

I don’t know if you would say that the Apostle Paul necessarily saved the “best for last” as we look at our One-Word for today. At first to our ears, the word FREEDOM sounds familiar, it sounds easy and enjoyable. It sounds like this should be a no-brainer. I’ll be honest with you up front – this last tasty last bite is going to take some work; in fact it may be one of the hardest to live out on a day-to-day basis. How do I use my Christian Freedom – remembering that it is a precious gift as well as a tremendous responsibility?

If this sounds a bit intimidating, remember this: the same Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to write these words – is the very same who will help you and me understand them and put them into practice so that we are blessed and moreover, that God’s family is strengthened as you and I use our Christian Freedoms to God’s glory.

I. It’s a Precious Gift

As we look at Christian Freedom, we need to be clear how God defines this word – lest we get our worldly understanding of Freedom confused with God’s gift. In the Bible Information Class that I teach, this topic comes up in Lesson 18, near the end. And while it’s one of the last lessons, it is no less important. In fact, it’s intensely practical and applicable.

In that lesson I use this little chart with 4 boxes. The top 2 represent the things that God has clearly told us to do or not to do in his Law. Examples of DO would be: Go and make disciples; Honor your father and mother; Love your neighbor... Examples of DON’T DO would be: You shall have no other gods; you shall not murder, steal, commit adultery... These I find that most of us are pretty clear on. They are black and white; there is no gray area. Either we are to do these, or we are not do them.

Do	Don’t Do
Wise	Unwise

It’s the lower half of the chart that God addresses in this text. There are many topics where God is silent on. The fancy term that theologians give to this is *Adiaphora* – things about which God is silent. It’s inside of this area that we have the gift of Christian Freedom. What makes this particularly challenging is that to a great degree – Our Conscience is our Guide. Words which people have found helpful here as they seek to utilize their freedom in the best possible way are “Wise” and Unwise”.

In our text, Paul sites two examples of adiaphora: 1) the day we are to go to worship, and 2) whether to eat meat or only vegetables. ⁵ *One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* ⁶ *He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.* Now these things may not sound like too earth shattering of an issue, but when you consider that the way these matters were being handle – it was beginning to harm people’s faith, dividing believers, causing anger and embitterment – that is a big deal!

Remember the makeup of the believers in Rome. This congregation had long-time Jews who had become believers and followers of Jesus AND it had Gentiles, people from all different walks of life, cultures and experiences. For the Jews, all their life they had worshiped on the Sabbath – which was Saturday. For the Gentiles, the concept of worshiping on Sunday was only natural – that’s the day Jesus rose from the grave. And because Jesus lives – every day is a great day to worship the Lord! Just imagine if we changed our main day of worship from Sunday to Monday – that might have the potential to cause some division, anger, embitterment... and yet in the New Testament, God has not set for us the Day of the week we are worship.

The other issue involved the practice of eating meat or only eating vegetables? In those days, the meat that you purchased at the market quite often came from animals that were sacrificed to idols. Again, it’s not hard to see how some of the members, especially Gentile converts to Christianity, would want NOTHING to do with their former way of life and those false gods and idols. As an exercise of their Christian Freedom some decided it would be best for them to eat only vegetables. You can imagine the potential challenges that might arise at the Church potluck? If the table was loaded full of meat or if others laughed at you for picking from the veggie tray – you would not be inclined to return; moreover your relationship with Jesus would suffer.

Paul doesn't give a direct answer for either question – nor should he have. God hasn't given specific direction to his New Testament church on either matter. This is where Christian Freedom needs to be exercised. This is where we ask ourselves, taking all things into consideration, seeking to act in love... which course of action would be “wise” and which would be “unwise.” As we heard last week, “Love does no harm to a neighbor.” (Romans 13:10)

And this is the hard part... in every situation like this, we need to stop and ask ourselves these questions. In the same way, we need to realize that taking one course of action in a certain situation, may not be the wise choice at a different time or in a different situation. Yes, this is the challenge, yes, it takes work, yes it takes a depth of Christian love and understanding – so that the use of our Christian Freedoms builds up the body of believers. Christian Freedom is a gift – but boy is it a tremendous responsibility too.

II. It's a Tremendous Responsibility

Recently we added an additional worship service. Your pastors discussed this with the Elders extensively. We knew that this topic was in the area of Christian Freedom. We were free to choose Tuesdays at 6:30 in the morning, just as we were free to choose Fridays at 5:00 pm. Christian love for our members and those in our community deemed that those options probably would have been unwise. After looking at several options, we felt that Thursday at 6pm would be a wise option, giving it a 90 Trial window.

The opportunities to put our Christian Freedom into action really are numerous, and daily. I'll toss out a number of them: I'm free to drink a beer (I'm over 21), but would it always be wise? Certainly not. There are times I will exercise my freedom and refrain from a drink. The cloths I wear... God hasn't mandated suit and tie; nor blue jeans and a t-shirt. However, there are certainly types of clothing that would be wise and unwise. depending on the situation and places I'm going. How about when your last hour arrives, then what? Will you choose to go the casket route or be cremated. God doesn't forbid one or the other. We could keep on going... style of worship, the color of carpet in church, who keeps the checkbook in the family, who does the dishes... In each household, in each situation the answers can be very different – and you are free to answer which is wise or unwise in your situation – but remember that YOU are never alone. God asks us to consider this, ***“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”***

What he's saying is that whatever we choose to do in matters Christian Freedom – DOES MATTER – it makes an impact on our brothers and sisters. We don't live just for the benefit of ourselves – we live to the glory of God in all we do – including the use of our Christian Freedoms. So as we ask ourselves, “Is this wise, or unwise,” we need to consider not only how this impacts ourselves, but first, how does this impact our neighbor and how it reflect upon God. – Again, if this all sounds like a lot of work – you've observed correctly! And that's just how God wants it.

God wants us to work through these matters prayerfully, carefully, considerately, so that we can have the joy of building up the body of believers... even if that means setting aside my personal opinion in a matter of adiaphora, for the sake of the kingdom. Leading by example, Paul says in verse just following this text that while he knows he's free to eat meat, for the sake of his fellow believer, he would abstain on such an occasion.

Of course, the greatest example of putting aside one's personal freedoms for the good of others is our Savior. In verse 9 we find our proper motivation to wisely use our Christian Freedom. ***For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.***

Our whole relationship with God is based up on this: the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Satan had destroyed the relationship which existed between man and God in the Garden of Eden. The image of God which man possessed was lost in the Fall. Man stood under the condemnation of death – with ZERO freedoms. Yet look what the Son of God did! He freely assumed human form. He willingly came to reverse that guilty verdict. He knowingly endured our condemnation. He freely, lovingly set aside his life – for ours. Why? Because he knew that his sacrifice was the only thing that could set us free from the curse of sin. Not only was this his Father's will – but it truly was the wisest exercise of freedom ever.

Christ's ministry of reconciliation has restored to us life and peace and hope and freedom. “The gift of God is eternal life” and that life not only includes redemption from *“all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil;”* it also carries the guarantee that we *“should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness”* (from Martin Luther's explanation of the Second Article). In this new life, in this blessed freedom, may we by the power of the Holy Spirit strive each day to wisely use the gift of Christian Freedom to God's glory and for the strengthening of God's kingdom. Amen.