

“Treasure your freedom!” Gal 5:1, 13-25

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Perhaps you have heard it said. This is one of those misunderstandings that is so, so widespread among those who don't know yet the true God through Jesus Christ, His Son.

What I am referring to is this misunderstanding that Christian faith, that following Jesus is somehow about losing our freedom, about being restricted, put into a box, about living under some imposed rules, about being robbed of the joys of this earthly life, etc. Have you heard this one?

How do we reply to such false accusations? We could, of course, simply quote Paul the apostle from his letter to Galatians: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

Paul is clear that being a Christian, following our Master Jesus is actually about being called out of slavery into freedom, that we are set free by Christ, finally to be able to live as free people. But I guess a bit more of explanation is needed.

Therefore, let's reflect together, first, what is the worldly understanding of freedom, second, what is Christian understanding of freedom, and finally, how does Jesus set us free to be who we are created to be?

How does the world understand freedom? At the risk of oversimplification, we could say that the worldly understanding of freedom goes something like this. That we are free when we can be whoever we want to be and when we can do whatever we want to do. When no restrictions are imposed on us and when we don't need to suffer anything that we haven't chosen ourselves. I think this is

more or less accurate a description. When I myself choose and define who I am and what I want to do with my life. Period.

But what then is our Biblical, Christian view on freedom? In our view true freedom is not when we do what we want, but when we genuinely desire for ourselves the same things that our caring and gracious Creator desires for us.

Or we could say that we can enjoy true freedom only when our wills, when our hearts are in complete harmony with the will of our dear Lord and God. When we from the depth of our hearts desire to live and act the way we are designed and created to live and act.

Already from these simple descriptions we can begin to see that what the world mistakenly considers to be freedom, is, in fact, the very opposite. We could say that it is actually a slavery to self, to never-ceasing, ever-changing, never-satisfied cravings and passions of our hearts.

Anyone who has tried to obtain this freedom and to satisfy these cravings and passions will be able to testify how exhausting it is. You hate all the obligation imposed on you, you crave, you thirst for something that you don't have, or something that you are not, or haven't done, and you believe that if only you could have it, or be that, or do it, then you would be happy and fulfilled.

Then one day you get there, and ... what a disappointment, what you were hoping to find, it is not there. The bar has just been lifted higher, the final destination of your 'happy-ever-after' has just been moved to other location.

Now, let's take a look how Jesus gives us true freedom and what it is that He frees us from. And surely, this is just one of many ways how we could describe our Christian freedom, but it will give us at least some ideas.

What do so many freedom seekers struggle today with? With the lack of self-worth, with the lack of significance. So many these days toil hard just to show to the world, which doesn't care, by the way, that they are somebody, that they have made their name. They work tirelessly to establish their own self chosen identity, hoping that that will make the difference.

Only some succeed, most fail. And even those who seemingly succeed, their identity is established on such thin an ice of success that it can collapse under them any minute. Everyone knows that there is nothing permanent in this world. How is that a freedom? This is where Christ comes in and frees us. How?

Jesus reveals us who we truly are in God's eyes. Who we truly are according to God's design and intention. Jesus reveals that you, each one of you, are created in God's own image, as God's own representative here on earth.

That you are infinitely precious in your Father's eyes. That you are actually so significant for our God, that Jesus, the Son of God, was willing to sacrifice Himself so that only you would learn and believe how valuable you are for Him. How can anything surpass this? What else could make you more

significant than such incredibly high view in God's eyes? This is how Jesus frees us from all this meaningless toil for self-esteem and gives us true freedom.

What's next? People may imagine that they are free lords over their own lives, but there is a threat that hangs over their lives and which shadow can't be removed. This is the threat about our future, about our security, ultimately about our fear of death. Good luck being free from that!

This explains why people worry so much, why we save so much, why we need more and more, why we struggle to share, why we need more and more assurance and insurance. For we never know how much will be enough. Is there enough at all? Can we be truly safe? And regardless of what we do, eventually death comes to all of us.

Jesus comes and brings us freedom. He frees us from the fear about our future, He gives us true peace that surpasses all our understanding. How? He makes you members of His own family. His Father who is in Heaven, God the Creator Almighty becomes also your Father in Heaven.

And He promises that He will never ever abandon us. That doesn't mean that we will be spared of all the challenges of this world, not at all, but we are assured that whatever happens, He will be with us. What is more, He takes away the ultimate fear of death.

Once we belong to Him, death has no power over us. Sure, our sinful bodies will die, and that's good, for they are not in the best condition anyway, but we will live in the presence of our God, and on that Day, which He has appointed, we will receive also new resurrected, perfect bodies, fit for eternal life with eternal and holy God in what God calls the New Heavens and the New Earth. This is how Jesus frees us from our fear about future and fear from death.

What's next? We recently spoke about it. All human beings experience this powerful force squeezing us, the Law. It forces us to try to be good. And if we want to be free in the worldly sense, we can never escape from this force.

The Law will compel us to show that we are good, to justify our choices and decision, to do things that we believe will make us good people. But the thing is, then you never know whether you have done enough or not. Are you good enough or not? There is no stopping, no rest, no freedom... just never-ending deep restlessness and insecurity.

And yes, Jesus frees you from the force of the Law. On our own we can't be ever good enough. Because the bad in us goes into the very depth of our hearts. We can't change it. Our surface goodness in actions can't do anything about what we carry in our hearts.

This is where Jesus comes in. He takes all our sin, everything that is wrong with us, everything that we can be accused of, everything we have failed to do, He

takes it all upon Himself, He claims that to be His responsibility and His guilt and He suffers the consequences, He takes the death sentence.

But then He rises from the dead and offers to us this great exchange. He has taken our sins and death, and we receive His innocence and life. As free gift. As very expensive gift, and together with this gift, He gives us good conscience.

Thus, we don't need to justify ourselves anymore, we don't need to try to appear better on outside, we are free to admit our faults and imperfections, for we know that our God won't count them against us. Thus, Jesus frees us from this life-long wheel of self-justification.

Let's take a look at one more. What the world calls freedom, the Holy Spirit calls the works of the flesh: "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these."

Look at all those who have tried to drink from this cup and see where that freedom has led them. Into misery, destruction, emptiness and despair. There is no light at the end of that path. But this is where our fallen hearts naturally are leaning, this is what we by our fallen nature desire. Our own end.

Jesus comes and sets us free. This is where we can see the truly creative work of God. Creative in the sense that by His Word and Spirit He not only frees us, He creates us anew. He creates in us new hearts, that begin to long for all the good things that our Father has intended for us.

When the Holy Spirit indwells in us, He begins to change our wills, and we indeed begin to desire what is in harmony with our Father's will. And, sure, this is where the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit in us begins and wages.

The Spirit in us, or our new being, longs for the freedom that Christ gives, but the old being in us still craves for the things of the flesh. That is the battle that Christians wage till their last breath. But this is the battle for true freedom.

The battle worth fighting with all that we have. Most importantly, we are not fighting it on our own. The war for our freedom has been won. Jesus has come out victorious. And through baptism He has claimed us to be His. You belong to Him. And He Himself provides for us what we need in this battle.

He is the One who daily speaks to us and sends His Spirit into our hearts. He is the One who walks with us, and helps us to walk as free people, as those who have overcome the captivity of the flesh, who have crucified our flesh with its passions and desires and now can rejoice following Jesus, keeping in step with the Spirit. This is how we understand true freedom.

This is how we can explain it to the world and to our loved ones who still are deceived and enslaved. This freedom is a wonderful gift, the Good News. Let's enjoy it in fullness ourselves and let's do what we can, to free as many as we can. Amen.