



**INDEPENDENCE DAY**  
(Honoring those who helped gain our independence)

**LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, July 5, 2009**

**Sherman H. Cox, II, Guest Lectionary Commentator**  
Director, SoulPreaching.Com

**Lection – Galatians 5:1-13** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (v. 2) Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. (v. 3) Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. (v. 4) You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (v. 5) For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. (v. 6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. (v. 7) You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? (v. 8) Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. (v. 9) A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. (v. 10) I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. (v. 11) But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed. (v. 12) I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves! (v.

13) For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Every Independence Day citizens of the United States commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 and celebrate the freedoms described in the founding document. With noble and lofty language, the document opens:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

A crucial historical point not to be missed is that the signers of the Declaration anticipated and enunciated language about such a great freedom even though the people of the New World were yet locked in armed struggle against the British for the independence the Declaration so boldly declared. In fact, it was not until 1783, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, that the Revolutionary War officially ended and American freedom became a political reality. Although African Americans and other oppressed groups, such as Native Americans, had to wait to experience even the most basic of freedoms enjoyed by the writers of the Declaration and the signers of the Treaty, the Declaration nonetheless gives witness to a profound truth which even the likes of Harriet Tubman understood. That is, freedom must first be claimed in one's heart and mind before it can be made materially real and, this point makes for an interesting question regarding freedom -- is freedom attained at the moment one has decided to be free and has claimed the freedom one intends to pursue through actions? Or is freedom only attained at the point at which one has actually won the struggle against subjugation?

At what point does subjugation cease? Which is essentially to ask if it is a physical or psychological reality? And, on this question, it would be interesting to explore the position held by Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Galatians 5: 1-13**

## **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I began elementary school in 1976, the year of the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Although it is now more than thirty years later, I remember quite well the year-long celebrations of independence and freedom meant to elicit patriotic fervor among the citizenry. Over time, however, I began to think that in various ways some of our abuses of freedom needed to be restrained. It seemed to me that the “freedom of me,” the mentality of the self-centered person with free will looking out for “number one” without regard for others, has been the principal cause of damage to our families, communities, and nation, and, not least, to the Kingdom of God.

Although my American upbringing has taught me to appreciate the freedoms I enjoy, modernly, it seems to me that there is hardly any emphasis placed on the responsibilities that go along with these freedoms. The responsibility that accompanies our individual and collective freedoms can in fact be deduced from the familiar Declaration passage: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Read in the light of the biblical Kingdom of God idea and, specifically the mandate to love one’s neighbor as oneself, the Declaration might very well be interpreted as saying that the “freedom of me” does not and cannot override the “freedom of us.” Just as the heavenly Creator is “our Father” and not alone “my Father,” so are all people equal. So are all people endowed with inalienable rights. So have all people the right to life; and we now understand that life is a collective rather than individual reality. There is a delicate balance at play in the ecosystem of which humanity and all living things are a part; and in one way or another, abuses of freedom inevitably upset this delicate balance.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Our selected biblical passage delineates the titanic struggle between slavery and freedom in the life of the Christian believer. Jesus has given us the gift of freedom, as well as an understanding of its requirements; yet, in the pursuit of freedom, we often choose opposing ways that land us or keep us in bondage. Some of the Gentile believers whom Paul had taught attempted to gain the freedom of Christ by practicing circumcision. On the one hand, Paul chastises them, saying that the practice of circumcision came under the old law which would not bring them ultimate freedom through Christ. On the other hand, he explains that neither circumcision nor non-circumcision really matters in light of the ultimate criteria for freedom. What matters, ultimately, he says, is that through the mechanism of love faith manifests itself in works.

Paul also promotes an ethic for Christ-freed people. All who are truly made free, he says, should use their freedom, not as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but for communal uplifting. Used correctly, freedom should serve the good of others, as through love believers become slaves to one another. This is a crucial point to focus on in our day and age, for there are many enticing and misguided notions of freedom being marketed and circulated among us, and those notions are essentially destructive of true freedom.

The Apostle says in our scriptural passage, “You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.” We were running well. Who led us astray as to the true meaning of freedom, and by what means were we led astray? Advertisers—they have used tantalizing images to bewitch us into thinking that freedom entails unrestrained consumerism and conspicuous consumption. Profiteers—this mix of rich men, politicians and lobbyists have used their wealth to horde more and more for themselves while putting in place laws that shelter the rich and create an ever-widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Religion—some people in the religious community promote a gospel of prosperity, which has much to do with materialism and little if anything to do with true freedom.

In stark contrast, Paul reminds us that freedom comes through Jesus Christ and carries with it a social and specifically communal responsibility. This is the only freedom we can count on to make us truly free, just as there is only one love that makes true freedom mandatory as a matter of integrity. Economic freedom has not made us free, other than superficially. Political freedom has not made us free, other than superficially. All of these forms of so-called freedom can only gain substance and come to fruition by means of a communal freedom wherein there is a recognition and respect for the fact that “all people are created equal” and are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” This Independence Day we celebrate equality of persons, those who have fought and died to gain and maintain this independence and the Creator who endows all of creation with the desire for independence.

## **Celebration**

We may have gotten sidetracked in our Christian walk—enticed and misguided, in part from being miseducated. We may have bought into one or another lie promising freedom, yet keeping us in bondage. The good news is, however, freedom is still at hand and available. Indeed, freedom calls: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” It is quite often an honor and privilege to be called to something—called to ministry, called to a life of healing, called to teaching, called to parenthood. A calling of this kind is not simply a matter of choice; it is a summons of great importance, leading to action of great significance. To be called to freedom, then—what a grand and magnificent moment!

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** Persons standing firm and not submitting again to a yoke of slavery (v. 1). Persons running well; “Standing firm” and “running well”—these two images especially remind us that freedom comes at the price of unyielding conviction and the exertion of great effort. “A little yeast leavening the whole batch of dough” (v. 9)—this reminds us that this seemingly small matter has huge consequences; and

**Sounds:** The urgency of the matter of freedom resounds in this passage, starting with the exclamation of Paul, “Listen!”— “Listen! I, Paul, am telling you...” (v. 2). Urgency is also conveyed in Paul’s emphasis on the fact that he is repeating himself— “Once again I testify to

every man...” (v. 3).