

Galatians 5:1,13-25  
Pentecost 3 + Proper 8C + July 3, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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Living by the Spirit

The Word of the Lord from Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

My house is connected to St. Al’s hospital by Curtis Road, a straight mile and a half that I’ve driven many times at many different hours of the day and night. For much of the way, the powers-that-be have planted some rather visible signs that keep repeating the same message: Speed Limit 30.

I have read these signs many times. I don’t like what they have to say. In my personal opinion, 30 miles an hour is a ridiculously slow speed for Curtis Road. The city has actually adjusted part of it to 35 which is, at least, better.

The City of Boise suspects that I might disagree with the posted limit, so they work hard to encourage me to abide by it. Namely, they frequently send some friendly, though serious, men on motorcycles with radar guns to make sure that I am in fact driving at the designated speed; and if their presence isn’t enough to remind me, they would be quite willing to engage me in conversation – right there, without an appointment, on the side of the road – to further inspire me to drive carefully, and they may well bolster this discussion with a written notice which has some monetary significance attached to it. Should this conversation take place, my insurance company will also do its part to motivate me financially to be a law-abiding citizen.

Setting aside all of that negative motivation, there are all sorts of great positive reasons for driving the speed limit on Curtis. It’s in service to my fellow man. By obeying the limit, I help make Curtis safer for all of the pedestrians, cyclists, skate-boarders and bunches of kids who are near or on the road. I help other drivers keep the appropriate pace, and I don’t pressure others who *are* abiding by the limit. I can serve as a good example and reminder to others of how we can work together to make our neighborhoods safer. I can even save a little bit of gas, even if it costs me an extra 30 seconds to get to where I’m going.

With all of that, it just makes sense to drive down Curtis road at the right speed.

I do, and I’d like to tell you that it’s for all of the community-service reasons that I just listed. But the truth is that I obey because the state and my insurance company have made it so that it’s just not worth the risk. They just don’t agree with me that I should be an exception to the rules. The truth is that if I were pulled over, I’d probably be annoyed with the officer because I was ... guilty. So it’s a sad truth that, while I might be a shiny law-abiding citizen on the outside, on the inside I’m quite annoyed that *I* have to follow the rules, since it really ought to be *my* road; and I’m waiting for the day that the signs say “35 MPH” all the way; or better yet “CLERGY LIMIT: 45.”

I’m also pretty sure that the stoplight at Curtis and Emerald is out to get me. But that’s another story for another time.

The point is that laws are in place to encourage us to do the right thing, and to warn of consequences if we don’t. There’s a reason why there’s a law against breaking the speed limit,

and why there's not a law against keeping it. There's a reason why there are laws against aggressive driving, but not against courtesy and watching out for others. Laws aren't supposed to forbid everything, only wrong things.

And really, shouldn't we Christians be all about doing the right thing just because it's the right thing to do?

I'm not talking about local speed limits, but about God's Law. God gives us a bunch of laws, summed up in the Ten Commandments. Paul goes one step further in our text and says, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" To live by God's Law is to live a life of love for those around us – and isn't that what we should be about? After all, Paul begins Galatians 5 by saying that Christ has set you free for freedom's sake. You're set free to do the right thing, not the wrong thing. Not only that, you're set free to do the right thing for the right reasons, which means that you're not doing the right things out of fear of God's wrath, but just because they're good things to do.

That's what it means to live by the Spirit. That's what your life as a Christian is to be. As one forgiven and set free from sin, you simply do the right thing happily, because you're full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There's no law against such things, because such things are good and God-pleasing. Laws don't forbid everything, only wrong things.

Speaking of wrong things, our text gives you quite the list of forbidden sins: sexual immorality, impurity and sensuality kick things off, and the devil has a heyday with tempting people into sexual sin. Idolatry is a big one, that temptation to worship things other than God. Sorcery might sound archaic, but in the Greek it includes abortion and today could also easily include drug abuse. Enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy are all sins where people believe they're better than others and don't want to be servants to those around them. Drunkenness and orgies round off the list, where people are tempted to excess in service to their base desires. And don't forget the catch-all at the end: Paul adds "and things like these" to make clear it's not an exhaustive list. There's *more*.

These are all good things to avoid. They don't do any good for anybody. What's more, you're set free from such sins, cleansed by no less than the blood of Jesus Christ. You're so set free that you don't keep God's law on the outside while you're wishing on the inside that you could go ahead and break the law. Right? *Right?!*

No. I wish, but no. Not as long as you're in this world. Not as long as that old sinful nature still clings to you.

Put the average church-going male in a room with a soft-core porn magazine for an hour, and the best you can hope for is that he's annoyed that he had to exercise so much self-control to *not* look through it. But he's not going to be saying, "Sure am glad that isn't tempting at all anymore! It didn't bother me a bit." Faced with a regularly-annoying neighbor, the typical Christian's line of thought is, "Even though I might wish him ill, I'm going to keep that inside and continue to be kind and courteous. That's the Christian thing to do." Actually, it's not. It's the law-abiding thing to do. The truly Christian thing would be to be able to say honestly, "I can continue to be kind and courteous on the outside to this individual because I feel *nothing but* compassion and selfless love for him *on the inside*."

That's the freedom for which Christ has set you free. See what a blessing it is to be truly set free from sin and to fully live by the Spirit?

And do you also see what a high standard holiness is?

So as Paul warns of submitting again to a yoke of slavery, I would bid you to guard against two sins.

The first is the crass license of our age. In other words, it is all too common for people to regard forgiveness as a free pass to continue in sin: "I know it's wrong, but God forgives me." In truth, God forgives those who repent of their sins, not those who willfully continue in them. As Paul makes clear in our text, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." If you do not repent, you are still enslaved in sin and bound in that yoke; and a slave to sin is not a beloved child in the family of God.

The second is far more subtle and common among well-meaning Christians. It is the temptation to believe that God loves you because you keep your evil thoughts inside and do the right thing in spite of them. Those thoughts betray you as still sinful. It's very much like living as the Pharisees did. The truth is that, as long as you've still got those sinful inclinations inside, you're still sinful and unholy. You're still under the law.

Do you really want to trust in your own righteousness to get you into heaven?

And yet, there's still hope for you. Not a 1-in-a-million chance, but a certain hope that will not disappoint. That hope is Christ Jesus, who has set you free from sin. The sinless Son of God was born of Mary, human like you but without sin. He did the right things on the outside because His heart was pure on the inside. He was completely free from sin. He resisted temptation for you because it was right to do so out of love for you. He died on the cross for all of your sins, even the envy or anger that you work to keep inside and never let see the light of day. Please take this to heart: He did this without any resentment or bearing any grudge toward you whatsoever. He didn't go to the cross saying, "This is really unfair and I don't like these people, but I'll suck it up and do the right thing anyway." He went to the cross not because He had to, but because that's what love does.

Risen again, He sends His Spirit with the forgiveness that He has bought by His blood; and He does it abundantly by His Word and His Supper. As you still struggle with sin and all too easily fall to temptation, He says, "I've got you covered: My blood covers and cleanses you of all your sins, and all that My Father sees of you is good and right and holy."

So you live by the Spirit. You live as one repentant and repenting, acknowledging your ongoing need for Christ and His grace. And you live because the Son of God gives to you the credit for His love, joy, peace, patience and all the rest. And so you live with hope, because for the sake of Jesus you will inherit the kingdom of God; and once delivered from this world, free from sin, you will finally know the joy you have of living by the Spirit without the nagging filth that your sinful flesh still visits upon you.

It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. And in Him, my friends, you are free indeed.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen