

YOUUnited
Galatians 5:13-15
July 5, 2020
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On July 4, 1776, representatives from 13 colonies signed what we know as The Declaration of Independence. *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.* But what happens when my rights bump up against your rights? On this weekend when we celebrate independence, a coronavirus rages out of control across much of the United States. There is a way to stem the tide called face masks, but my right to wear a mask bumps up against your right not to wear a mask. It gets to heart of freedom.

In 1791, the thirteen colonies ratified the first ten amendments to the Constitution. We call these ten amendments The Bill of Rights. Most nations do not have a Bill of Rights. They guarantee our personal freedoms. Here's some of them:

- The right to free speech: it's why I can say whatever I want and you can comment however you want and we can shout at each other. Isn't America great?!
- There's right to a free press.
- Right of assembly. That's what gives groups the right to organize marches and protests.
- Right to practice the religion that we want.
- Right to bear arms – this one is in the news a lot. Some ask, is there a limit to this right?
- Right to Due process.
- Right to a jury trial. Does anyone get their slip of paper in the mail and say, thank God I'm an American and I get to participate on a jury? But it is a privilege most people in other nations don't have.
- There's the right against search and seizure.
- The right not to face cruel and unusual punishment.
- And then there one you may not remember. The right not to quarter soldiers – which reminds us that if we wrote the Bill of Rights today it would look different. We'd want the right to free wifi or free education or free health care.

And the founders of this nation knew we would want other rights which is why we have the 9th amendment: *The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.*

There are other rights beyond what is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. But what every parent knows is that if you have rights and those rights are not coupled with responsibility, things can go horribly wrong. Did you ever have the car keys taken away from you when you were a teenager? Mom or Dad said, "Here's the keys. You can take the car." But then you didn't get home on time or Dad noticed a dent in the car that wasn't there before you took the car. You had the right but you did not show responsibility so the right was removed. Or I remember the day one of our children had her bedroom door replaced with a sheet. If you slam the door one more time, you lose it! You have a right to a bedroom door, but without responsibilities you lose it. It turns out my rights are not simply about me. ME must always be balanced by protecting WE.

2000 years ago, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a group of churches in Galatia. They were Gentiles who became Christians, but there was confusion because other teachers came along and told them that in order to be Christian they must keep all of the laws of scripture. And at that time the scripture was what we know as the Old Testament. To be Christian, they were told they

had to follow strict dietary laws and men had to be circumcised – the laws told them what to do and when to do it and in order to be Christian – in order to have the right to be Christian, follow the laws. And Paul wrote this letter to say now that you are Christian, you are not under the Jewish law but a different law. And I think what he tells them applies to where we are as a nation.

Remember the first time you got in the car and nobody was with you. You were 16. You had your license – and you were all alone in the car and you looked at the speedometer which went up to 120 and you began thinking, “I wonder if...” There I was in my parents Ford station wagon – a V8 because every car in those days was a V8 and it had power. We think freedom is about doing. I had freedom and I was going to use it. And that’s our natural inclination – to use our freedoms for me – to benefit me. And Paul comes along to say, wait a minute. You are Christians. You have been given freedom but what’s important is how you respond. **You, my brothers and sisters, were called to freedom; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge our selfish impulses.** Paul knows us. He knows that when no one is watching you, you will use whatever freedom you have to do whatever you can get by with. But he’s saying, you are Christians. Don’t leverage your freedom for your benefit and neglect what God has called you to do. Don’t ask what can I get by with or where’s the line or is there a law against it. **but serve each other through love.** Say that with me – serve each other through love. No one can make you do that. There is no law that can force you to serve another person – or love another person. But Paul says, there is a command in the scripture and it’s a command that was central to everything Jesus did. **All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’** What if you leveraged your freedom to love others? What if all day long your reason to live is to love others? Imagine how this world would change or this community would change or your workplace would change or your family would change. Imagine if everybody did that. For just one day in America – that would be a true Independence Day!

2000 years ago, Paul was saying, if you leverage your rights for you and forget you have been called by God to do unto others – here’s what happens. **If you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don’t get eaten up by each other.** If you say, that’s mine! I got here first! That’s my right; the law says and I’m getting an attorney. Well then I’m getting two attorneys. I’m getting the meanest attorney so you lose everything you’ve got and then some. Paul says, if life is about ME and what’s my right, we will become like wild animals biting and devouring each other and we will destroy each other.

But Paul knew the church could turn that around – and it still can. Church people can turn that around. Christians can turn that around. If I would wake up every single day and decide to leverage my freedom for the sake of your freedom. It starts with one simple question. How can I help?

Kids, if you want to take control of the family, when you wake up tomorrow say to your parents, “How can I help? What can I do to help?” When you go to work on Monday, say to your co-workers, “How can I help? You’ve got a lot on your plate and we’re in this together, so how can I help?” Husbands, make sure your wife is sitting down, and then say to her – “Honey, how can I help?” What can I do to help? God looked down on a broken world and asked, what can I do to help? And God determined the best way to help was to send his one and only Son – to come alongside you and do life with you – and the least you can do is turn to each other and say, how can I help? Jesus gave his life. I’m not asking you to do that – just ask somebody, what can I do to help? Even if it’s somebody you don’t like, what can I do to help? What if before this day

comes to an end you said to somebody – what can I do to help? Because it's not about ME, it's not about what I have the right to do or what's permissible. My rights will bump up against your rights, and your rights will bump up against mine. The questions for us: What's the most loving thing we can do? What can I do to help? Imagine if every Christian did that. It would be a true Independence Day. What will we do with our freedom? Those who follow Jesus Christ know what to do. The Bible tells us – it's not about me, it's WE.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 5, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Jesus, you showed us with your life the kind of people you call us to be. We sense your Spirit within us, and yet we struggle against the brokenness that often afflicts us. Strengthen us and help us to find our way on your path, Lord. Help us to reflect your love in our daily lives. Amen.

Monday, July 6

Scripture: Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-3

Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn't any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God. So anyone who opposes the authority is standing against what God has established. People who take this kind of stand will get punished. The authorities don't frighten people who are doing the right thing. Rather, they frighten people who are doing wrong. Would you rather not be afraid of authority? Do what's right, and you will receive its approval. It is God's servant given for your benefit. But if you do what's wrong, be afraid because it doesn't have weapons to enforce the law for nothing. It is God's servant put in place to carry out his punishment on those who do what is wrong. That is why it is necessary to place yourself under the government's authority, not only to avoid God's punishment but also for the sake of your conscience. You should also pay taxes for the same reason, because the authorities are God's assistants, concerned with this very thing. So pay everyone what you owe them. Pay the taxes you owe, pay the duties you are charged, give respect to those you should respect, and honor those you should honor.

First of all, then, I ask that requests, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving be made for all people. Pray for kings and everyone who is in authority so that we can live a quiet and peaceful life in complete godliness and dignity. This is right and it pleases God our savior.

Observation: This week we will examine in greater detail God's calling on us as Christians as we seek to be good citizens and to be engaged in the issues facing our world. Let's begin with the biblical teaching regarding how we respond to our leaders. Remember that the leaders (kings and emperors) that Paul and Peter wrote about were not believers. They were pagans who were often known for their immorality. Yet notice the posture Christians were to have toward their leaders.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? How do these readings speak to Christians today? Does this mean we cannot criticize or question our leaders? How might this passage have troubled American Christians at the time of the American Revolution against Great Britain?

Prayer: God of liberty and justice, I lift before you all those who serve as elected leaders locally and nationally. Grant that they will serve with a greater interest in helping others and honoring you. I also pray for your guidance as I decide whom to support in this year's elections. Amen.

Tuesday, July 7

Scripture: Romans 14:1-23

Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand). One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must have their own convictions. Someone who thinks that a day is sacred, thinks that way for the Lord. Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God. And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord, and they thank the Lord too. We don't live for ourselves and we don't die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God. This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. Because it is written, *As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God*, so then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. So stop judging each other. Instead, this is what you should decide: never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of your brother or sister. I know and I'm convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is wrong to eat in itself. But if someone thinks something is wrong to eat, it becomes wrong for that person. If your brother or sister is upset by your food, you are no longer walking in love. Don't let your food destroy someone for whom Christ died. And don't let something you consider to be good be criticized as wrong. God's kingdom isn't about eating food and drinking but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ this way pleases God and gets human approval. So let's strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up. Don't destroy what God has done because of food. All food is acceptable, but it's a bad thing if it trips someone else. It's a good thing not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything that trips your brother or sister. Keep the belief that you have to yourself—it's between you and God. People are blessed who don't convict themselves by the things they approve. But those who have doubts are convicted if they go ahead and eat, because they aren't acting on the basis of faith. Everything that isn't based on faith is sin.

Observation: At times American politics seems to tear our nation apart. Early Christians struggled with intense disagreements about certain matters of faith: whether a Gentile convert had to be circumcised; whether Christians were bound by the Law, or free to live under grace; whether meat sold in the markets throughout the Empire, which had been slaughtered according to pagan practices, dedicated to the gods and goddesses, could be purchased and eaten by Christians; and a whole host of other issues. In our passage today Paul teaches Christians how to disagree on these issues.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? In the midst of great acrimony that develops during political campaigns, how can you as a Christian be a bridge builder and "strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up?"

Prayer: God of us all, help me to keep you foremost in my life. Help me to always consider the most loving response before speaking or acting. Give me a heart that will love even those with whom I disagree so that I might listen and learn. Amen.

Wednesday, July 8

Scripture: Matthew 17:24-27, 22:15-22

When they came to Capernaum, the people who collected the half-shekel temple tax came to Peter and said, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" "Yes," he said. But when they came into the house, Jesus spoke to Peter first. "What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings collect taxes, from their children or from strangers?" "From strangers," he said. Jesus said to him, "Then the children don't have to pay. But just so we don't offend them, go to the lake, throw out a fishing line and hook, and take the first fish you catch. When you open its mouth, you will find a shekel coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us."

Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism. So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion. "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked. "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

Observation: Citizens of Israel in Jesus' day reacted in two ways to Roman rule. Some (i.e. tax collectors) went along with it to gain wealth, or at least to avoid trouble. Others hated and resisted it as an insult to them and their God. Seeing only those two options, Jesus' enemies thought they had him trapped. But he taught a profoundly different way: dual citizenship, honoring legitimate duties to the state, but giving ultimate loyalty to God as king.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Jesus' enemies asked a "yes or no" question. Political campaigns often do the same to complex issues—conservative or liberal? My party or yours? Red or blue or purple? Jesus knew many issues aren't that simple. Peter learned from his master, and put different imperatives all in one verse (see 1 Peter 2:17).

Prayer: Lord God, so many loud voices want to claim my ultimate allegiance. Keep my heart attuned to your still small voice, the voice of my true king. Amen.

Thursday, July 9

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-24, 43-48

"You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don't commit murder*, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.

“You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Observation: Using today’s political language, we’d say the Sermon on the Mount was Jesus’ “platform.” In it, he defined his kingdom’s principles. A striking part of that platform was the unusual way Jesus taught his followers to relate to enemies. Avoid contemptuous, angry words or attitudes, he said. Instead offer God’s love to everyone.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? In verse 22, the word translated “you idiot” was the Aramaic word *raca*. People didn’t use it for friendly bantering, but to express deep-seated contempt for another person. What tempts you to feel contempt for candidates or people you know who see political issues differently than you do? How would campaign ads and personal conversations change if we all lived by Jesus’ standard?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your “platform” challenges and inspires me. As I take in your love, help me to better understand the many dimensions of the love you pour into me—and want me to extend to others. Amen.

Friday, July 10

Scripture: Romans 12:9-13:1

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don’t try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord. Instead, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God.

Observation: First-century Rome was a lot like Washington, D.C.—a city obsessed with politics. So it was especially striking that, in his letter to Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul called them to live as Jesus, their true king, did. They were to seek peace, and overcome evil with good. Like Jesus, Paul virtually ignored human power struggles (Nero was probably

emperor when Paul wrote this letter), and focused on living as citizens of God's invisible yet supreme kingdom.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? These verses can be hard to live into even in everyday settings: "Be the best at showing honor to each other... If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people" (verses 10, 18). What inner fears and drives make it hard for you to honor and live at peace with people who are different from you? How can God's eternal love for you provide a foundation on which you can set aside the need to climb above others?

Prayer: Lord God, I like being right. It's hard to accept that good people can reach different conclusions. Keep teaching me how, in your Spirit, to live at peace with all people. Amen.

Saturday, July 11

Scripture: Ephesians 4:29-5:2

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children. Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God.

Observation: Ephesians 4:15 called on readers to grow in Christ by "speaking the truth in love." That set the stage for today's reading, which outlined Jesus' values. God's people, it said, can live in unity without anger or insults, being kind, compassionate and forgiving toward each other. That principle wasn't limited to realm of political disagreements—but it certainly didn't exempt them, either.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Perhaps the most challenging part of the verses we've read this week is that they are not just about how we behave outwardly. God offers to transform us inwardly, in ways that our outward behavior will then reflect. How can you open yourself to God to allow the Holy Spirit to shape you into a person who can more fully live out the call to "Live your life with love, following the example of Christ"?

Prayer: Lord God, I ask your Spirit to speak to the hearts of all the people seeking to serve our country in political offices. I ask you to transform my heart so I can see people, politics and government as you do. Help me follow the example of Christ. Amen.