

Liberty in Christ

“Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
—Galatians 5:13,14

PUTTING ON THE “MIND of Christ,” the title of this continuing series of articles, necessitates that we first be made free from the mind we have inherited from Adam. That is a mind which suffers from the many besetments of sin and fallen tendencies passed down to us from our first parents. Thankfully, through the mercy and grace of our loving Heavenly Father, he has made possible the means whereby his consecrated people can both attain, as well as maintain, this freedom. It is this provision, which we have titled “Liberty in Christ,” that is the focus of our present lesson, an understanding of which we believe can greatly assist us in developing the “mind of Christ.”

For thousands of years, countries and individuals have debated the meaning and value of liberty. Some have claimed liberty grants complete freedom of thoughts, words, and actions to each individual without regard to others. However, throughout history we have seen most countries restrain liberty

through laws and customs designed to balance individual liberty with the needs and peace of all. This restraint of individual liberty for the greater good of all may have been most famously stated in the second sentence of the United States 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.”

FREEDOM FROM THE LAW

When considering liberty in Christ, we find similar restraints on individuals which are intended to benefit the body in general. The Apostle Paul never suggested the saints were to consider themselves to have total liberty without regard to others. His epistle to the Galatian church was a proclamation that they had been freed from the bondage of the Law in order to gain the liberty which was in Christ. Upon seeing some Jews failing to let go of the demands of the Law in favor of this liberty in Christ, Paul expressed his disappointment in them with these words: “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.”—Gal. 1:6,7

In the third chapter, we read an even more stern condemnation of this distortion of the Gospel of Christ. The *J. B. Phillips* translation entitles the words of Galatians 3:1-8: “What has happened to your life of faith?” Note the apostle’s harsh words

as translated by *Phillips* in these verses: "O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? I will ask you one simple question: did you receive the Spirit of God by trying to keep the Law or by believing the message of the Gospel? Surely you can't be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances? Has all your painful experience brought you nowhere? I simply cannot believe it of you! Does God, who gives you his Spirit and works miracles among you, do these things because you have obeyed the Law or because you have believed the Gospel? Ask yourselves that. You can go right back to Abraham to see the principle of faith in God. He, we are told, 'believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Can you not see, then, that all those who 'believe God' are the real 'sons of Abraham'? The scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles 'by faith', really proclaimed the Gospel centuries ago in the words spoken to Abraham, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.'"

Continuing this powerful lesson about liberty, Paul reminds these early Jewish converts of God's purpose concerning the Law in verses 24-26, saying, "The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." Paul clearly instructs them that the Law kept them in bondage through the imperfection of the flesh. This made it impossible to keep the Law perfectly. The Gospel of Christ,

however, is based on faith, needing no perfection of the flesh. So Paul continues, saying, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—vss. 28,29

This is true freedom—this is meaningful liberty, for Jews and Gentiles alike! The detailed rules, customs, and ceremonies of the Law no longer need to be followed. Rather, a full dedication to do God’s will and complete faith in the shed blood of Christ result in our being justified in God’s sight. If we are thus justified by faith in Christ, we will be, Paul says, Abraham’s seed and heirs according to God’s promise. This was the liberty Paul explained to the Galatian brethren and to us.

LIBERTY—NOT LICENSE

A closer examination of liberty in Christ makes it clear that our liberty is not without some restraints. The word translated “liberty” in our opening scripture comes from the Greek word *eleutheria*, meaning “freedom (either legitimate or licentious)—liberty.” The word “license” is similar to “liberty,” but with one very distinct difference. One of the definitions of “license” states that it is “freedom that allows, or is used with, irresponsibility and disregard for standards of personal conduct.” Clearly this definition has no part in our liberty in Christ.

Paul emphasized this very point when using the Greek word *eleutheria*, saying that it was not to be used “for an occasion to the flesh [licentiously], but by love serve one another.” Thus he established a

vitality important principle in his words to the Early Church and to all the footstep followers of Christ throughout the entire Gospel Age. Indeed, we have been granted liberty, but this great gift must be used properly and responsibly.

FREE MORAL AGENTS

To understand liberty in Christ requires understanding free moral agency—that is, free will to make choices. The Bible is filled with individuals who were granted gifts by God, along with the liberty to exercise them in accordance with his great plans and purposes. Their choices, made through the exercise of free moral agency, help us better understand the importance of rightly exercising liberty.

Let us consider and compare the *Logos* [Jesus in his pre-human condition] and Lucifer. Both were created perfect spirit beings by God and were his great delight. However, they responded much differently to God's love for them, and exercised their liberty of action in opposite directions. Here is the account of Jesus exercising his liberty: "Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart."—Ps. 40:7,8

Compare that account with the record of Lucifer's use of the same liberty. Of him it is said, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the

sides of the north.” (Isa. 14:12,13) Both Jesus and Lucifer had liberty, but they exercised it in very different ways.

Let us also consider Adam, who was created a perfect human being, in the image of God, with the liberty to make his own decisions. After Eve ate of the tree forbidden by God, which carried the penalty of death, we read how Adam exercised his choice: “The man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” (Gen. 3:12) God gave Adam the liberty to make his own choice, and Adam chose to disobey. As New Creatures, we have now been given the liberty which comes through Christ. Will we exercise it properly, in accordance with our consecration vows, or will we follow some other course of action?

LIBERTY TOWARD BRETHREN

Paul lays down the principle of exercising liberty toward our brethren in our theme text, quoting again: “Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”—Gal. 5:13,14

By moving away from the same fallen fleshly nature which led to Israel’s bondage under the Law, Paul instructs us to use our new-found liberty in Christ to serve one another. We are thus to use the power of love in action—“by love serve one another”—to displace our prior bondage to the weaknesses of the flesh, which tended toward serving self and self-interest.

There is good reason why liberty in Christ should create in us a desire to serve our brethren, rather than serving selfish interests. We must remember that we have not chosen one another, but God has chosen each of us. "Now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."—I Cor. 12:18-25, *New American Standard Bible*

Understanding that God loves each member of the body of Christ even as he loves our Lord should make us exercise our love toward one another in a pure and genuine way. (John 17:23) Paul speaks to this point, saying, "Let us have no imitation Christian love. Let us have a genuine break with evil and a real devotion to good. Let us have real warm affection for one another as between brothers, and a willingness to let the other man have the credit."—Rom. 12:9,10, *Phillips*

Faithfulness demands that we exercise Christian love for one another unconditionally. This is one of the basic requirements of exercising our liberty in Christ which cannot be ignored. There are many more scriptures which describe how we should exercise liberty toward our brethren. However, we will quote just one more which summarizes this point: “Now if your experience of Christ’s encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of his Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy, do make my best hope for you come true! Live together in harmony, live together in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you. Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people’s point of view.”—Phil. 2:1-4, *Phillips*

RESTRAINTS ON LIBERTY TOWARD BRETHREN

As we consider how we should restrain exercising our liberty toward brethren, we must first remember that we are not free to criticize one another’s convictions. “Welcome a man whose faith is weak, but not with the idea of arguing over his scruples. One man believes that he may eat anything, another man, without this strong conviction, is a vegetarian. The meat-eater should not despise the vegetarian, nor should the vegetarian condemn the meat-eater—they should reflect that God has accepted them both. After all, who are you to criticize the servant of somebody else, especially

when that somebody else is God? It is to his own master that he gives, or fails to give, satisfactory service. And don't doubt that satisfaction, for God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory."—Rom. 14:1-4, *Phillips*

Second, we are instructed to not exercise our liberty to remain at odds with our brethren. "If, while you are offering your gift at the altar, you should remember that your brother has something against you, you must leave your gift there before the altar and go away. Make your peace with your brother first, then come and offer your gift." (Matt. 5:23,24, *Phillips*) With these words, Jesus makes it clear that peace with our brethren is a requirement that must be met, even before sacrifice, if we are to rightly exercise our Christian liberty.

LIBERTY TOWARD THE WORLD

When considering how we should exercise our liberty toward the world, let us remember that we are representatives of our Heavenly Father. Consider the consistent scriptural testimony along this line. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." "I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men." "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ."—Matt. 5:16; I Cor. 4:9; II Cor. 5:20

As representatives of God, we should exercise our liberty toward the world with love and compassion, because we know their fallen condition in Adam. God sent his son to die for all while they

were yet in their sins, and we need to show similar sympathy and love. Paul provides these words which instruct us to treat the world with love and respect: “Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”—Rom. 12:14-18

The Scriptures further testify that our liberty in Christ should cause us to seek to do good to those in the world. “Let us not be weary in well doing. . . . As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”—Gal. 6:9,10; Matt. 5:44

Remembering that mankind is currently in a broken condition because of Adam’s disobedience, our Christian liberty should incite us to humbly preach the Gospel, as directed by God’s Holy Spirit. We are not to do this as if it is our gospel. Rather, we are to give credit always to God for the great privilege we have been granted of sharing with others the truth of his Holy Word. It is only through the gift of God’s enlightening spirit that we know the beauty of his plan. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by

his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.”—I Cor. 2:9,10

Therefore, when we have the opportunity to give witness to the Gospel of Christ, we should give credit to the Heavenly Father—the author of that Gospel—by quoting scripture. This means we should further exercise our liberty by diligently studying the Scriptures, in order to gain a better understanding of them and how they fit into God’s great plan of salvation. “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”—II Tim. 2:15

RESTRAINTS ON LIBERTY TOWARD THE WORLD

While remembering that we are representatives of God, and that we are to show love and compassion to all, Christian liberty also requires that we separate ourselves from the things of the world. While we are in the world, we cannot partake of its fallen spirit. Paul makes this very clear with these words: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”—Rom. 12:1,2

LIBERTY TOWARD GOVERNMENTS

As students of the Bible, we are aware that governments and their leaders are just as much in a broken condition as is the world itself. However, we are to remember that the governments in power today exist as part of God’s plan. When interpreting

the dream of an impressive image seen by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, the Prophet Daniel said that God gave him a kingdom, power, strength, and glory, which was represented by the image's head of gold. Daniel then said that three subsequent kingdoms would arise in succession following Babylon, through the appointment of God. (Dan. 2:37-45) This succession of kingdoms, though fallen and imperfect, would nevertheless provide a period of order during the present evil world, until the time came when God would set up a kingdom that will last forever. This is the same kingdom for which Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Matthew 6:10—"Thy kingdom come."

The foregoing shows us that God has permitted fallen kingdoms and governments of men to exist continuously until the establishment of his kingdom. This being the case, our liberty toward them should be exercised in harmony with the instructions of Jesus, on the occasion when the Pharisees tried to entice him into speaking against the rule of the Roman Empire. Instead of criticizing this ruthless government, which had been allowed to rule according to God's arrangement, Jesus took a Roman coin and answered with these words: "Whose is this image and superscription [on the coin]? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."—Matt. 22:20,21

Jesus did not criticize the government or leaders who would eventually consent to his being put to death. Paul followed this same pattern and actually took advantage of his Roman citizenship to fulfil

his mission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Exercising our liberty toward today's governments and leaders should follow the example and pattern of our Master, Jesus, and of the Apostle Paul.

RESTRAINTS ON LIBERTY TOWARD GOVERNMENTS

The Apostle Paul summarizes how our liberty towards governments and political leaders should both be exercised and restrained in his epistle to the Romans. He says, "Every Christian ought to obey the civil authorities, for all legitimate authority is derived from God's authority, and the existing authority is appointed under God. To oppose authority then is to oppose God, and such opposition is bound to be punished. The honest citizen has no need to fear the keepers of law and order, but the dishonest man will always be nervous of them. If you want to avoid this anxiety just lead a law-abiding life, and all that can come your way is a word of approval. The officer is God's servant for your protection. But if you are leading a wicked life you have reason to be alarmed. The 'power of the law' which is vested in every legitimate officer, is no empty phrase. He is, in fact, divinely appointed to inflict God's punishment upon evil-doers. You should, therefore, obey the authorities, not simply because it is the safest, but because it is the right thing to do. It is right, too, for you to pay taxes for the civil authorities are appointed by God for the good purposes of public order and well-being. Give everyone his legitimate due, whether it be rates, or taxes, or reverence, or respect!"—Rom. 13:1-7, *Phillips*

Let us not waste consecrated time criticizing governments and people we know are merely part of the broken, fallen systems of this present evil world. Instead, let us follow Paul's advice and give respect to those appointed of God. "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour."—I Tim. 2:1-3

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY AND FORGIVENESS

No discussion of liberty in Christ would be complete without examining the principle of forgiveness. When Paul told early Jewish converts that the bondage of the Law had been replaced by liberty in Christ, he emphasized the fact that God's unlimited love toward the human family should also become their new pattern of conduct. As all liberty requires some restraint for the sake of the greater good of all, Paul stressed that Christ's followers must be restrained only by the character of Christ, not by fallen human thinking. Jesus was in full harmony with his Heavenly Father, and the standard which he set for us to follow was intended to develop in us the very character of God himself. (Matt. 5:48) Key to God's character is his unrestricted love for his human creation, to the extent of providing his "only begotten son" to die to be the ransom price for Adam. If God can forgive fallen man for his sins, we also must forgive just as freely.

While this requirement seems impossible to the flesh, we have examples of those who fulfilled it. Consider what Stephen said as he was being stoned for Jesus' sake: "They stoned Stephen, [who was] calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."—Acts 7:59,60

Paul gives us instructive words concerning the importance forgiveness plays in exercising our liberty in Christ. "As, therefore, God's picked representatives . . . purified and beloved of God himself, be merciful in action, kindly in heart, humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you. And, above everything else, be truly loving, for love is the golden chain of all the virtues."—Col. 3:12-14, *Phillips*

Nowhere is the principle of forgiveness, as part of our liberty in Christ, expressed so clearly as in these words spoken by Jesus himself: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt. 6:14,15) Liberty in Christ requires that we forgive others—not just our friends, but even our enemies. Doing so teaches us to be more humble, and more like our blessed Master.

In summary, liberty in Christ does not make us better than others, nor does it give us the right to act in a superior manner. Exercised properly, it will not help us accumulate momentary treasures upon

earth, but will instead help us accumulate eternal treasures in heaven. Those striving for heavenly riches bear a great responsibility toward others as well as to themselves with regard to properly enjoying the gift of liberty in Christ. May we ever recognize and faithfully seek to carry out the important tasks associated with this great privilege, and thus be assisted in the development of the “mind of Christ.”



“The man who simply hears and does nothing about it is like a man catching the reflection of his natural face in a mirror. He sees himself, it is true, but he goes off without the slightest recollection of what sort of person he saw in the mirror.

“But the man who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and makes a habit of so doing, is not the man who hears and forgets. He puts that law into practice and he wins true happiness.”

—James 1:23-25, Phillips