

Freed to Love & Live by the Spirit

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- [0 : 0 0] Our passage today has a really famous verse in it. It's called the fruit of the spirit. And actually, just as it was for the kids with Warwick, it was the first memory verse I ever did on a Christian camp when I was about 12.
- And so let's see how I go. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and personal hygiene. No, it's, sorry, self-control.
- Clearly, I need more of that. Really famous verse in the New Testament, actually. But this week, I think verses 19 to 21 are more famous.
- Have a look at verse 19 to 21. See, these verses 19 to 21 have been made more famous lately by Israel Folau, the Australian rugby player. You see, Israel Folau quoted verses 19 to 21 on his social media pages, and as a result was fired from the Australian rugby team.
- And the whole debacle has many facets to it. But I think one side of the argument, for some people, the thing that's really hard to swallow is that they would say, well, Israel was just exercising his freedom of religion or his freedom of speech.
- [1 : 1 8] After all, it's a free country, isn't it? You see, that's what we say when people tell us how to live. Hey, mate, it's a free country. Leave me alone. I love Aussie rules football.
- This past month, the AFL has introduced what they call behavioral awareness officers. And so at Marvel Stadium, when you go there, they've got these people who walk up and down the aisles, and when you shout abuse at the umpire, they kick you out of the ground.
- Hey, AFL, it's a free country. What are you doing? Leave me alone. In Australia, we're allowed to spend our money any way we want. We can accumulate wealth.
- We can save up for our own retirements. We can spend all of our money on ourselves if we want or give it all away. It's a free country. We can go wherever we want, live wherever we want, holiday wherever we want, even if that place is Adelaide.
- Although I'm not sure why you'd want to do that. I'm out. Oh, actually, you're from Adelaide. Sorry. I mainly joke, we're going on a holiday to Adelaide later, so I'm only joking.
- [2 : 2 3] But I was going to say Tasmania, but I've made one too many Tasmanian jokes. But in Australia, in Australia, no borders, no checkpoints, no hassles, no worries.
- It's a free country. In Australia, we can have a relationship with anyone we want, married or single, gay or straight. We can have a casual relationship with one or many partners all at the same time with no legal consequences.
- We're in a free country. But I think even further than that, Christians are more free than others. You see, Christians are also free from the religion of works.
- That is, we are free from having to earn our way to God. We said that all other religions, all other worldviews have to approach God, have to get to their best life through their own effort, their own moral performance, their own works.
- In Galatia, they thought the same thing. They said, you must be circumcised to approach God. Paul says, no, it's your faith in Jesus that counts.

- [3 : 34] His death, his work, not yours. Paul said as much last week in verse 6 of chapter 5. He said, for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.
- And so here is the question. If nothing we do or don't do has any salvation value, if we're free Christians living in a free country, why can't we do whatever we want?
- Why can't we practice the law or religion if we want? Why can't we do whatever we want? And actually, maybe that has already occurred to you many years ago when you first became a Christian and you realized that the cross of Christ is like an ultimate get out of jail free card.
- Remember in Monopoly, you get the get out of jail free card. Maybe you think forgiveness in Jesus means, hey, maybe I can do whatever I want. He frees me from guilt. Why can't I do anything?
- Surely that's what real living in a free country is. And that feels like a naughty question, doesn't it? That feels like a naughty sort of sentiment.
- [4 : 42] But actually, I want to encourage you because if you think that, that means you've begun to grasp the nature of God's grace. That is his free, unmerited salvation in Jesus.
- He does everything. You do nothing. You get it for free. We're free from the religion of works. But instead of an encouraging pat on the back, the Apostle Paul wants to give us a stern warning as usual.
- It's a warning that when Christian freedom becomes a license to do whatever you want, you lose everything. And so in our passage today, there is an encouragement.
- There's a warning. And we'll finish with a challenge. An encouragement, a warning. Sorry, it's a warning, an encouragement, and a challenge. So they're the three points on your handout. The handout will really help you today.
- I like to have, I don't like a very busy handout, but I couldn't help it this week. There's lots to say. So please keep the handout open. We're at point number one. And the key verse today, the key verse is verse 13.
- [5 : 46] Chapter 5, verse 13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Flesh here means our fallen nature, the nature we inherited from Adam.
- It is our natural human state apart from God. It is our rebellious heart, twisted with self-centeredness, prone to sin.
- In verse 19 to 21, you can see some of the behavior our sinful nature is capable of. Notice all of those things are twisted with self-centeredness.
- Sure, we're free from guilt. Sure, nothing we do counts towards salvation. But Christian freedom is not a license to do whatever we want, to indulge this sinful nature.
- Rather, verse 13, serve one another humbly in love. See, apart from God, we're hell-bent on serving ourselves. Paul says, no, no, do the opposite.
- [6 : 49] Serve one another humbly in love. Verse 14, for the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command. Love your neighbor as yourself. Remember, Paul is speaking to a church who thought the more Jewish laws they keep, the more God would be pleased with them.
- He says, hey, if you want a Jewish law, here's a Jewish law. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you can do that one thing, you've actually fulfilled the entire law, in fact. Notice, love your neighbor is the opposite of verse 15.
- If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other. The illustration there is of a feeding frenzy. You know, you ever watch an Attenborough documentary where sharks are in the water and suddenly they smell blood and they go bananas and just bite and devour one another?

Paul's warning that if we use Christian freedom as a license to do whatever we want, as a license for religion to sneak back in the back door, then rather than serving one another humbly, our church will look like a feeding frenzy of sharks.

That means spiritually speaking, no one will be left alive. It's pretty strong, isn't it? Because instead of loving one another humbly in service, people will be indulging their sinful nature.

[8 : 11] We'll be allowing the behaviors of verse 19 to 21 to flourish. We'll be full of religious one-upmanship. Who is really right with God?

Who's not so right with God? Who's doing better at it? Who's not so good? Who's in? Who's out? Who's upper class Christian? Who's a lower class Christian? We'll develop a caste system within our church until, Paul says, the church will devour itself.

Yes, free Christians in a free country, but that doesn't mean we have the license to kill one another spiritually. That's the warning. The sinful nature is powerful, often relentless.

It feels like it has a hold over us. We seem to be plagued by the same sins wherever we go. What are we going to do? The answer is our second point.

Fight back. Verse 16. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.

[9 : 17] They're in conflict with each other. Why? So that you are not to do whatever you want. The illustration here is of a battle. Flesh and Spirit contrary to one another.

Flesh and Spirit in conflict. It's battle language. And so if I can, for the rest of the passage, I want to set it up as a boxing match, if I can.

So in the red corner is the flesh. The flesh is our sinful nature. The flesh is an undefeated heavyweight. It always wins because its chief weapon is selfishness.

Everyone wants to gratify their sinful nature. Everyone wants to trust in the religion of works. Verse 19 to 21 are the selfish acts of the flesh.

So there's sexual license. Verse 19, sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery. There is spiritual rebellion. Verse 20, idolatry and witchcraft.

[10 : 15] That is occult practice. Things in direct, overt rebellion to God. There is social strife. Verse 19, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions.

And there is sordid excess. Verse 21, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. You see, as long as the flesh is the reigning champion in a person's life, getting right with God is impossible.

Devout religion, good behavior, it's all good. It's good to be good. But they will only last so long while a person is directed and ruled and constantly punched into submission by the will of the flesh.

We'll always give way to the selfish acts of verse 19 to 21. And I think this teaching really undermines the view of freedom out there.

See, out there, freedom means doing whatever you want, whenever you want. I'm free. I'm exercising my free choices. That's what freedom is out there. But Paul says that as long as the flesh is the champion, as long as it is the heavyweight, people aren't actually free to make choices.

[11 : 34] They're actually slaves to their own sinful will. It's a really startling critique on modern freedom, I think. Even for the Christian who says, hey, I'm free from guilt.

Nothing I do counts towards my salvation. Surely I am free to do whatever I want. Paul's warning is that living in the red corner, for the Christian flirting with the red corner, the warning is they will be defamilied or unfamilied, whatever the prefix is.

They will be unfamilied by God. Look at verse 21. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit.

That's a family word. They will not inherit the kingdom of God. Indulging the sinful nature means forfeiting your inheritance. You'll lose your child status with God.

Please note that when it says those who live like this, that that is not a one-off sin, nor is it a season of life in sin, that is habitually living in the red corner, in the sinful nature.

[12 : 47] They will lose their family status. You'll be defamilied by God. Really strong, isn't it? But that's the red corner.

In the blue corner, the blue corner is for Christians who want to fight back. The blue corner is for Christians who feel this inner conflict, who don't want to please their sinful nature.

So if the red corner is a tough opponent, in the blue corner is God's heavyweight champion. He is the spirit. The Old Testament reading, which Allison brought us from Ezekiel, it talks about the change the Holy Spirit makes in the heart of a believer.

He says, I will give you a new heart. And I will put a new spirit or a new desire within you. We heard that the spirit, I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The idea is that God's spirit gives us a new nature, a new nature to rival our old nature, to triumph over our old nature, in fact, so that we will not do whatever we want.

[14 : 01] The spirit and our flesh are inside us in always a conflict while we're here on earth. It's a boxing match. The spirit helps us to fight back.

He is actually the champion. The flesh is not more powerful than the spirit. The way we fight back is verse 16. If we walk by the spirit, you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

In verse 18, we're told that the spirit leads us. In verse 25, it's the same thing. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit.

We walk as the spirit follows, keeping in step with him. The picture or the illustration here is of footprints on a beach. If you've ever gone to a beach and you know when you see footprints in the sand?

And you know when you try and follow, like you try and, you don't know who they are, but you try and walk in those footprints? And sometimes you're walking away thinking, oh my goodness, how big, how tall was this person? What long strides they've got?

[15 : 05] Or maybe you follow in those footsteps thinking, what kind of direction is this person going? It's not as they're zigzagging all up and down the shore. That's the illustration.

In the same way, God's spirit helps us fight back by leaving us footprints to follow, to walk in step with. The footprints he leaves us are, of course, the Bible, which he wrote.

As we follow his footprints through these pages, sometimes we have to stretch ourselves, wondering how big is this spirit? How long are these strides?

Sometimes we have to zigzag all over our lives, thinking, oh, what direction is the spirit leading me in? The point is this. The way we fight back is as we adjust our steps, as we adjust our lives to be in step with the spirit through the word, we become more like Jesus.

That's who the spirit is pointing us to. That's who his book is all about anyway. It's all about Jesus. As we walk in step with the spirit, he grows the godly fruit of the spirit.

[16 : 20] Verse 22, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Notice that these Christian virtues perfectly summarize the character of Jesus.

Notice that the fruit is not plural. So, you know, when you go to Woolies and the produce section and you pick and choose which fruit you're going to have, it's not the same. So it's not as though we say, wow, today I've got to deal with a really hard person.

You know, when you have that situation and you think, I really have to deal with this person again and I really am not looking forward to it. So I need to buy two kilos of self-control, but only one kilo of kindness because that's all they're worth.

It's not like that. It's one fruit, one super fruit. Maybe you could call it a super food, actually. The spirit produces this fruit. We don't sit there going, I really need to focus hard on kindness and being kind.

No, the spirit produces the fruit in us. You see, just as an orange tree doesn't sit there going, I really need to make oranges. The orange tree just focuses on getting more food to its roots.

[17 : 29] So we don't try and produce more fruit. We just try and get more food to our roots. Because the fruit comes naturally. The blue corner will feel like a battle.

Of course it will. You're fighting back against this sinful nature. This nature which has had a hold on us for all of our lives. It will feel like a battle living in this country.

Where everyone says, hey, it's a free country. Do whatever you want. That will be tough. Paul would want to encourage us. You see, the sign of the spirit in you is not some tingly buzz.

The sign of the spirit is not some heightened sense of euphoria. Nor is it circumcision or the religious trappings of the law, as the Galatians thought. The sign of the spirit in you is the battle.

It's the inner turmoil. The conflict of flesh versus spirit. Here comes that situation. I really don't want to sin. That is the sign of the spirit within you.

[18 : 34] It's the godly fruit of a new changed heart. It is the humble, loving service of other people, not yourself. These are the signs of the spirit.

Let me encourage you if you display any of them. If you feel like you are struggling too much in the battle. I was contacted by Jenny Moody and her Bible study group, a ladies group.

They meet on Wednesday night. And they're, I mean, they're pretty incredible, really. And they engage with the passages so often. And they're really honest with one another. And they said to me, we're trying really hard in the battle against sins.

But we always seem to, you know, we really don't want to sin. But we just keep on doing it. And that's the sign of the battle within you. Well done, ladies. You keep going. But let me challenge you gently and the rest of us with the last point here.

This is verse 24 onwards. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[19 : 42] The picture here is one of death. That's crucifixion, obviously. But it's not Jesus' crucifixion it's talking about. It's talking about the crucifixion of your flesh, which we put on the cross when we became Christians.

You see, when we became Christians, we nailed our sinful natures to a cross. And what do we know about crucifixion? Crucifixion was reserved for the very worst of criminals, wasn't it?

That's why it's so shameful that the Lord Jesus had to die that way. See, if our flesh is crucified, that means our flesh is not something to be respected.

A sinful nature does not deserve dignity. It is evil and bad. It deserves a shameful execution. If we're losing the battle, if we feel we're two small steps forward and a large step back, maybe, here's the challenge, maybe we have too respectful a view of our sinful nature.

Crucifixion was reserved for the worst kinds of evil. Remember that crucifixion is a painful death. Our sinful natures, they won't go down without a fight, without some pain.

[21 : 00] Here's another challenge. Maybe we love our sin. Maybe we love it. Maybe the challenge here is to celebrate the crucifixion of our sinful nature like it's the death of an enemy, not as though we're feeling the pain of the death of a loved one.

Maybe that's a challenge there. The third challenge about crucifixion is that it is decisive. It is a slow lingering death.

We saw that even on the cross with Jesus. And we feel it's a slow lingering death with our sin as well. It's still sort of hanging around. It is nailed on the cross.

That happened in the past tense. That's what Paul uses in verse 22. We made a one-off decision to put it on the cross, to put it to death. Paul says, leave it there to die.

Maybe the challenge is this. Every day you're faced with that situation. Don't get a ladder out and try and rescue your sinful nature off the cross. Nothing that goes on the cross ever comes off it.

[22 : 08] Don't try and rescue your sinful nature. Leave it there to die. Maybe the challenge is every day being another day where I'm just going to keep my sin where it belongs, keep my fleshly nature up on the cross.

Maybe that's the challenge for you. It will cause you pain because sometimes we love our sinful nature. It will be a struggle because sometimes we treat our sinful nature with just too much respect and dignity.

To free Christians in a free country out there, freedom means doing whatever you want. Paul says, do not give license to your flesh.

He warns of the danger. He encourages us to fight back by walking in the footsteps of the Spirit. And he challenges us finally to leave our sinful fleshly natures on the cross, to crucify them, to kill them, to execute them just as they deserve.

Verse 13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Rather, serve one another humbly in love.

[23 : 22] So I pray that we would be a church that does that. Let's pray together. Father God, please, would we not abuse freedom in Christ to indulge ourselves, to indulge our sinful nature, to do whatever we want.

Father, please help us to keep our sin on the cross where it belongs. Not to mourn its death like a loved one, but to celebrate its death like an enemy. Father, please help us to leave it there on the cross, not to pull it down.

Please, would you keep us walking in step with the Spirit to fight back. Please, Father, develop in us the fruit of the Spirit, so that we can serve one another, not ourselves.

In Jesus' name. Amen.