

Freed to Love & Live by the Spirit

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- [0 : 00] Our passage today has a really famous verse in it, the fruit of the Spirit. It was the first memory verse I had to learn on my very first Christian camp when I was, I think I was 12.
- So that was back in 1989. And so here I go. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and personal hygiene.
- No, it's self-control, isn't it? Clearly I need more of that. Really, really famous verse in the New Testament, isn't it? But actually I think today verses 19 to 21 are more famous.
- More famous because of Israel Folau, the Australian rugby player. He quoted verses 19 to 21 on his social media posts and was fired from the Australian rugby team.
- Actually, in the papers this week, he's preparing his legal defence. And the whole Israel Folau saga has many sides to it. But one side I think that's really hard for some people to swallow is that he's just exercising his freedom of religion and freedom of speech.
- [1 : 15] And hey, after all, it's a free country. You see, that's what we say, isn't it? When people tell you how to live. Hey, mate, it's a free country. Don't tell me how to live.
- I love Aussie Rules football. I watch it every week. But this past month, the AFL had these behavioural awareness officers walking up and down the aisles at Marvel Stadium.
- And any time someone abused the umpires, they were kicked out of the grounds. Hey, AFL, it's a free country. I've never heard of anything more ridiculous. In Australia, we're allowed to spend our money on anything we want, even ourselves.
- You can accumulate wealth. You can save for your retirement. You can give it all away if you want. It's a free country. In Australia, we can go where we want.
- We can live where we want. We can go on holidays we want, even if that is Adelaide. Although, I don't know why anyone would want to go there. I'm only joking.
- [2 : 16] I'm only joking. Right. I'm going on my holidays there next month. But 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 choose. Different races, different genders, married, single, gay, straight.
- We can have a casual relationship with one or more people all at the same time and no legal consequences. It's a free country. And actually, even further than that, I think it means that Christians in Australia are more free than others.
- Because we said that Christians are also free from having to earn our way to God. Remember, we said that all other worldviews, all other human systems are part of this religion of works, where you have to work or perform or do good deeds to get to God.
- But in Galatia, the Christians there, they thought you must be circumcised to be right with God. Paul said, no, no, no. Your faith in Jesus frees you from all of that.
- [3 : 35] His death is what counts, not your works. Paul said as much last week in 5 verse 6. He said, in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.
- And so here's the question. If nothing we do or don't do has 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 if we want? Why can't we practice religion if we want? Actually, maybe that occurred to you a long time ago when you became Christians.

The cross of Jesus, it seems like a get out of jail free card. Remember in Monopoly, you get the get out of jail free card. Maybe the death of Jesus, his cross is like that. Why can't we do anything we want?

Surely that is what real living in a free country is, isn't it? That feels like a naughty question though, doesn't it? But actually, I want to say it's encouraging.

[4 : 39] It's encouraging because it means if you thought that question, you've begun to grasp the nature of God's grace. His free, unmerited, undeserved blessing and salvation.

We're free from the religion of works because of God's grace. But instead of an encouraging pat on the back, Paul wants to give us a stern warning, as usual.

It's a warning that when Christian freedom becomes a license to do whatever we want, we'll lose everything.

And so our passage today has an encouragement in it. It has a warning in it and we'll finish with a challenge. So a warning, an encouragement and a challenge. They're the three points on your handout.

We're at point number one. Our key verse today is not actually the fruits of the Spirit. It's verse 13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh.

[5 : 41] Flesh here means the fallen nature that we have inherited from Adam. It's our natural human state apart from God.

It's our rebellious heart. It's twisted with self-centeredness and it's prone to sin. That's what the flesh is. In verse 19 to 21, Paul lists some of the acts of the flesh.

Notice all these things are twisted with self-centeredness. Sure, we're free from guilt. Sure, nothing we do counts to salvation. But Christian freedom isn't a license to indulge the flesh.

Rather, verse 13, rather serve one another humbly in love. See, apart from God, we're hell-bent on serving ourselves.

That's what the flesh does. Paul says, do the opposite. Serve one another humbly in love. Verse 14, for the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command.

[6 : 42] Love your neighbor as yourself. Remember, Paul is speaking to a church who thought God would be pleased if they kept Jewish laws. Paul says, do you want a Jewish law? Here's one. Love your neighbor as yourself.

It's from Leviticus. Notice that loving 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 here is of a feeding frenzy. Do you ever watch the Attenborough documentaries? When you see sharks and they get the smell of blood in the water and they go berserk and they bite and devour one another until there's nothing left.

That's the illustration here. Paul is warning the church that if they use their freedom in Christ as a license to do whatever they want, as a license for religion to sneak back in the back door, rather than serving one another humbly in love, their church will look like a feeding frenzy of sharks.

Isn't that pretty grim? That means spiritually speaking, spiritually speaking, no one will be left alive. Because instead of loving one another humbly, people were indulging their sinful nature.

[7 : 58] They're allowing the behaviors of verse 19 to 21 to flourish in the church. They're allowing religious one-upmanship to flourish. Who's in?

Who's out? Who's right? Who's wrong? Who's a higher class Christian? Who's a lower class Christian? Who's really got the spirit? Who's not yet there? Paul says your church will become like a feeding frenzy of sharks until spiritually speaking, no one is left alive.

Very grim. Yeah, free Christians in a free country, sure. But freedom doesn't mean a license to kill one another spiritually.

It's not a license to kill, as James Bond has. The trouble is, our sinful nature is powerful. It is strong.

Our flesh is relentless. It often feels like it has a hold over us, like we don't have any way to beat it. We seem plagued by the same sins every single day.

[9 : 00] What are we going to do? The answer is verse 16, our second point. So 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. They are in conflict with one another.

Why? So that you are not to do whatever you want. The illustration here is of a battle. Flesh and Spirit contrary. Flesh and Spirit in conflict.

And because it's battle language, I'm going to set up the rest of the passage like a boxing match. 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 own sinful nature.

[9 : 57] Everyone wants to trust in the religion of works. It's all about you. That's the flesh. The acts of the flesh are there in verse 19 to 21.

So sexual license. Verse 19 says sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery. Spiritual rebellion. Idolatry and witchcraft.

That is an occult practice, overtly rebellious to God. There's social strife, which is hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions and factions.

And there is also sordid excess. Verse 21, drunken 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, moral performance, that's all good. But if you are ruled and directed by the flesh, inevitably at some point, good and devout people will give way to the acts of the flesh.

[11 : 02] Verse 19 to 21. They will be knocked to the canvas and will not be able to get up because the flesh rules over them. It stands over them like a boxer over his victim.

And the problem is this teaching really undermines a 21st century understanding of freedom. Paul shows that as long as the flesh is the champion, people aren't free to make choices.

They're slaves to their sinful selves. I'm free to do whatever I want. No, you're a slave to your sinful nature. Even for the believer, the believer says, I'm free from guilt.

Nothing I do counts towards my salvation. Surely I'm free to do whatever I want. Paul warns that living in the red corner for a Christian to flirt with the red corner is verse 21.

They will lose their children status. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. They'll lose their childlike status.

[12 : 10] Indulging the sinful nature means forfeiting inheritance. Please note that when it says live like this, it's not for one-off incidents. It's not for a season of sin.

It's for people who habitually think they can live in their sin. The warning is you will defame yourself. You'll unfamily yourself, whatever the word is.

You'll come out of the family of God because you'll lose your inheritance. That's the sharp warning of verse 21. But for those Christians here, which I hope is all of us, who do feel this inner conflict, who want to fight back against the fleshly nature, then we have to move to the blue corner.

The blue corner, if the red corner is a tough opponent, the blue corner is God's heavyweight champion. In the blue corner is the spirit. Graham gave us the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, which talks about the change that the Holy Spirit makes in us.

He says, I'll give you a new heart. I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees, to be careful to keep my laws. The idea here is that God's spirit gives us a totally new nature.

[13 : 30] He takes away our old nature, gives us a new nature with new desires, a new ability to please God. So that we are not to do whatever we want.

A boxing match. That's what it's like to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. So flesh versus spirit. Red corner, blue corner. Constantly in conflict.

Paul says, if we walk by the spirit, verse 16, as he leads us, verse 18, for the first time ever, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Verse 25 says the same thing. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit. The picture here is of footprints on the beach. You know, when you walk on a beach and you see someone else's footprints ahead of you.

Have you ever tried walking to follow their footprints? And as you do it, you stretch yourself to these huge steps and you think, my goodness, how tall was this person? Or you follow their footsteps and they're zigzagging around the beach.

[14 : 34] You think, what kind of direction is this person, was this person walking in? In the same way, God's spirit leaves us footprints for us to walk in. The spirit's footprints are the Bible mainly, which he wrote.

As we follow his footprints through the pages, sometimes we have to stretch ourselves to follow his big steps. Sometimes we have to zigzag through our lives and wonder which direction the spirit is leading us.

The point is that as we adjust our steps to be in line with the spirit, we will become more like Jesus. That's who the spirit's book is about anyway.

It's all about Jesus. As we walk in the spirit's steps, he will produce the fruit of the spirit. Verse 22. Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Notice that these virtues are a perfect character description of Jesus. Notice that the fruit is singular, not plural. So it's not many fruits.

[15 : 44] It's not like you go to the produce section at Woolies and think, I'll have a bit of this and a bit of that. So it's not as though you say, imagine a tough situation. Imagine you're visiting in-laws or some really tricky people and you think, wow, today I'll buy two kilos of kindness, but only one kilo of self-control because that's all they're worth.

You see, the fruit of the spirit is one super fruit which produces all of those things. We don't pick and choose which one we think we need depending on the situation.

The spirit produces it. We don't. We don't focus really hard on kindness. The spirit produces that in us. Just as an orange tree.

An orange tree doesn't sit in your garden and think, I really need to produce oranges. I'm going to try really hard to produce oranges. The orange tree just focuses on getting more food to its nutrients.

The growing and the fruit comes naturally. In the same way, imagine you have that tricky situation. We don't focus really, I really need some more kindness and self-control because I've got to deal with that person today.

[16 : 53] No, we just focus on getting more of the spirit's food to our roots. The fruit of the spirit will come naturally, just like the orange tree.

I was telling someone yesterday, I said, when it comes to reading the Bible, to getting that food, I said, don't read the whole Bible. That might be too intense. Just read the parts you're comfortable with.

It's all about Jesus anyway. It's all the spirit's food anyway. They're all his footsteps. Read the part of the Bible you're comfortable with. Read over and over and over. And the fruit of the spirit will be produced naturally in you.

As we walk, he will convict and shape our footsteps, our lives, to be like Jesus. The blue corner, that is what life in the blue corner is like.

It is going to feel like a battle. It will be tough living in a free country like this. We're out there. Everyone says, hey, it's a free country.

[17 : 57] Do whatever you want. Paul would want to encourage us. The sign of the spirit in you is not a sort of a tingly hum in your heart.

It's not a heightened sense of euphoria. The sign of the spirit is not circumcision, as the Galatians thought. The sign of the spirit is an inner conflict.

It's the inner battle. Flesh versus spirit. It is the godly fruit of a new heart. It is the humble, loving service of others.

They are the signs of the spirit in you. If you feel that you are struggling too much in this battle, if you feel that life in the blue corner is too hard, if you feel like it's two small steps forward in my Christian life and one huge step back, Paul provides this challenge, which is where we're going to finish.

Verse 24. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The picture here is crucifixion, obviously, but it's not Jesus' crucifixion that it's talking about, actually.

[19 : 10] It's the crucifixion of your flesh, of your sinful nature. You see, when we became Christians, we nailed our sinful selves to a cross.

Jesus was there as well. The war is over, even though smaller battles rage. And when it comes to crucifixion, remember that crucifixion is reserved for the very worst of criminals.

It was shameful for Jesus to die that way. If our flesh was crucified, that means the flesh is not something respectable to be treated with dignity, to be treated as precious.

It is something evil that deserves the very worst and most shameful sort of death. If we're losing the battle against sin, it might mean we have too respectable a view of our flesh, of our sinful nature.

A crucifixion was reserved for the worst evil. That's what your sinful self deserves. That's what our sinful nature deserves.

[20 : 20] Notice that crucifixion is a painful death. We know that from looking at Jesus crucified. Our sinful natures were part of our lives for so long, they won't go down without causing us a lot of pain.

Sometimes we love our sin. The challenge here is to celebrate its crucifixion like the death of an enemy, not to feel the pain of its crucifixion as though it were a loved one who was trying to help you.

Thirdly, crucifixion is decisive. So although crucifixion is a slow lingering death, it is a certain death. When Christians first trust in Jesus, we fix our sinful natures to the cross.

And while it isn't dead yet, the language Paul uses here is in the past tense. We have crucified it already. That means we've made a one-off decision to put it to death.

Paul says we must leave it there. He says don't try and get a ladder and bring it down off the cross. Nothing ever comes off the cross, not even Jesus. He says leave your sinful natures there.

[21 : 32] Maybe that's the challenge for you today. If you're struggling to battle sin, stop trying to rescue your sin off the cross. Just leave it there.

Every day will be another day where you just decide to, I'm just going to leave that there where it belongs. Where all shameful things belong on the cross.

To free Christians in a free country, Paul warns that freedom doesn't mean doing whatever you want.

He says the danger, he warns us of the danger of giving license to our flesh. He encourages us to fight back by walking by the Spirit's footsteps.

And he challenges us to leave our old sinful fleshly selves on the cross where they belong. Verse 13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.

[22 : 28] But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. Rather, serve one another humbly in love. So I pray that we would do that. Father God, we thank you that you tell us the truth.

We thank you for the Spirit's words. The Spirit's footsteps that make us more like Jesus. That produce in us the fruit of the Spirit. Help us to stay in the blue corner, not in the red corner.

Please help us to treat our flesh, our sinful selves with contempt. Please help us to stop trying to rescue our sinful selves from the cross. But to leave it on the cross where it belongs.

We need your help. In Jesus' name. Amen.