Sermon Series: The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity
Sermon Title: You Exercise Freedom Responsibly

Text: **Galatians 5:13-23 -- For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.**

The commune of Christiania, in the heart of Copenhagen, Denmark, was supposed to be like Paradise. BUT, AS WE ALL KNOW, LIFE IN THIS FALLEN WORLD IS ALWAYS IMPACTED BY HUMAN SIN. Founded in **1971**, Christiania was devised as **a post-60s anarchistic eutopia where there was no government control and everything was supposed to be perfect**. It was meant to be a place where people could live outside of Denmark's market economy, free to build their houses where and how they wanted, to sell marijuana for a living, and to live as they pleased **as long as they didn't harm their neighbors**. Denmark's government oscillated between attempting to bring the community to heel and turning a blind eye as residents flouted property laws and drug laws. **But now, after 50 years, with worsening gang violence and fresh attempts by the government to normalize the commune, some residents see their dream of an alternative society fading**. **The infamous PUSHER STREET, once operated mostly by residents but now overrun by gangs, may be the first domino to fall**. One lifelong resident said, "***Growing up in Christiania was the best childhood ever. We had freedom. Pusher Street was very nice back then … Five to seven years ago [drug dealers] got much tougher. Now they only want profit. They don't bring good vibes***." Christiania has long embraced cannabis while shunning more dangerous substances. But as gangs overtook the drug trade, harder drugs made their way in, along with some of the violence of organized crime. **After a recent shooting, Christiania's residents, who operate a consensus democracy where decisions are made by unanimous assent in town-hall-style meetings**, **settled on two conclusions**: (**1**) that Pusher Street should be shuttered permanently, and (**2**) that the state should intervene—an extraordinary step for the **anti-establishment** community. (*from Valeriya Safronova, "After 50 Years, a Danish Commune Is Shaken From Its Utopian Dream," The New York Times (12-5-23)*). **Wow! It seems that no matter what ideals we have for ourselves, apart from God, HUMAN BEINGS ALWAYS SEEM TO FIND A WAY TO MESS EVERYTHING UP.**

This morning, as we launch a new preaching series called, "**The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity**" – **a look at the evidence that demonstrates we're growing into mature followers of Christ** -- I want to begin by taking a few minutes to consider what the Bible teaches about **the concept of freedom** by looking at what Paul has to say about here in Galatians.

This letter was written primarily to Christians living in the cities in the **southern part of Galatia**, cities like ***Pisidian Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium***. The Apostle Paul wrote it to address the teaching of certain people known as **Judaizers** that were attempting to ***replace the gospel of grace with a gospel of works*** (**Galatians 1:6-7 -- I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ**). These individuals were Jews who, while professing faith in Christ, sought to impose upon **Gentile believers certain conditions or rules** concerning the Christian life. **They taught that they must become Jews by circumcision before they could become Christians and that all Christians were righteous before God ONLY if they continued to keep the Old Testament laws, regulations, and ceremonies** (**Acts 15:1 -- But some**

men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"; Galatians 4:9-11 -- But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years! 11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain). **So, Paul argues throughout the remainder of his letter that Christ did not die to make us slaves to these things but to enable us to experience true freedom through faith in our Lord** (**Galatians 5:1 -- For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery – i.e., righteousness through the law**). LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT HE SAYS, BEGINNING WITH THIS POINT IN **5:13**.

CHRISTIANS EXPLOIT FREEDOM BY WALKING IN THE FLESH -- **Galatians 5:13-15 -- For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another**.

- **The ABUSE of freedom results in libertinism** (**i.e., *mixing Christianity with the world***). Libertinism is the belief that one has the right to act without any kind of moral restraint. Some people refer to it as '***license to sin***.' **This was the concern of the Judaizers, the teaching of which Paul addresses here in Galatians**. All the talk that Christ had come to set prisoners free made them nervous. **Knowing human nature as they did, they worried that if believers were not subject to the law, then what was to keep them from constantly giving in to temptation and sin**? Of course, this was not what our Lord meant in **Luke 4:18 -- He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed** -- or what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he spoke of freedom in his letter. As a matter of fact, he warned the believers living in Galatia that ***they should never use their freedoms to gratify their sinful desires*** (**do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh -- verse 13**). **For him, freedom was not so much about the right to indulge oneself by giving in to fleshly desires (especially those that didn't seem to hurt anyone else), as it was the possession of Holy Spirit power to resist them and do what was right**. **Paul knew that libertinism would only lead to disunity and moral chaos. *He understood that for freedom to work, there have to be limits to it***.

  Let me illustrate it for you. Imagine if everybody did whatever they wanted to. No limits, no laws, no regulations. Everyone just did as they pleased. Now, suppose that you and another person go into partnership to buy a rowboat, with each paying half the cost. Then you draw a line right down the middle to divide it up evenly --- half for each of you. You get in and start rowing out to sea. Just as you get out of sight of land, you decide to pick up a drill and start making "**freedom" holes** in the bottom of your end of the boat. Your partner begins to scream that your "**freedom**" is sinking the boat! You respond by saying, "***I have a right to express myself on my end of the boat, and you have no right to censor my creativity***." The question then becomes for both of you: When does one person's freedom become another's funeral? Listen…***the benefit of freedom isn't that Christians can live without any boundaries and do whatever we want.*** **Rather, Christ sets us free so that we can do whatever God wants and love our neighbors in the process.** WHEN WE WALK IN THE FLESH AND LIVE SELF-CENTERED LIVES, WE STOP CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER. THIS **ABUSE IS CALLED LIBERTINISM** – the exercise of freedom without any moral restraint – mixing Christianity with the world. ***Now there's another way to exploit the notion of freedom***.

- **The ABSENCE of freedom results in legalism** (**i.e. *mixing Christianity with religion***). Legalism is a system whereby the works of man contribute to his standing with God. We see it all the time today when people lay claim to a relationship with God because of **what they've done or will do**. The Judaizers believed that salvation could only come to those people who would subject themselves to the Law. Of course, this wasn't why God gave the Law. **It wasn't given to eradicate sin but to expose it.**
  - **The Law was given to bring knowledge of sin.** As we hold up God's holy law (**Romans 7:12 -- For the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good**), we become conscious of our sin as a

legal offence against Him for which we deserve condemnation (**Romans 3:19-20 -- Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin**).

- **The Law was given as an instructor to lead us to Christ** (**Galatians 3:24 -- Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith**). It was not given to make us righteous, but to lead us to someone who could do that for us, namely Jesus. **Any attempt on our part to establish righteousness apart from Christ is legalism. It places people in bondage to a set of rules and regulations in order for them to achieve right standing with God (and us)**. We shouldn't be surprised by this, however. Christ encountered the same thing. He was accused by the Jews of keeping the wrong company (**See Matthew 9:10**); sinning by breaking the Sabbath (**See Matthew 12:1-8**—*picking grain was one of 39 kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath according to the Talmud*); and not following their rules (**Mark 7:5-8 -- And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men"**). ***Is it possible to find some forms of legalism masquerading as Christianity today***? Some people believe that only one translation of the Bible is truly the Word of God; or that Christians should never go to movies or play cards; still others argue that if we don't look a certain way, then we are not acceptable to God. (**Review: CHRISTIANS EXPLOIT FREEDOM BY WALKING IN THE FLESH, WHICH LEADS TO LIBERTISM -- mixing Christianity with the world – AND LEGALISM -- mixing Christianity with man-made rules**)

WE EXPERIENCE FREEDOM BY WALKING IN THE SPIRIT -- **Galatians 5:16-18 -- But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law**. This is in the present tense, meaning ongoing activity.

- **The Command – Walk by the Spirit**. There is both an active and a passive element to this command.
  - **We are to walk**. This implies effort on our part and requires that we make the willful choice to conduct our lives in the manner to which we're called by God.
  - **We are to walk by the Holy Spirit** so that, moment by moment, we submit to His direction, control, and guidance.
- **The Consequence – We will not carry out the desires of the flesh**. **Paul goes on to say that the Spirit and the flesh are in opposition to one another, so that when being controlled by one, we will not be able to satisfy the other**. The Bible is full of similar kinds of statements that show two realities to be MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE of each other. For example: we can't serve God and money (**See Matthew 6:24**); we can't bless God and curse men (**See James 3:8-10**); a good tree cannot bear bad fruit (**See Matthew 7:18**); and a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand (**See Mark 3:24**). Here Paul's point is simple: ***It is only when we walk by the Spirit that we can conquer our sin nature***. WE HAVE NO OTHER ABILITY TO OVERCOME THE FLESH. Outside **St. James Church in Shere, England**, you will find a metal plaque marking the site of the cell of **Christine Carpenter, Anchoress of Shere 1329**. An anchoress was a person who would withdraw from common life to dedicate themselves to God and bind themselves to the church by living the rest of their earthly life within a small cell. Christine's life as an anchoress began in 1329. She explained to **the Bishop of Winchester** that she wished to be removed from the world's distractions to lead a more pious life. This request was granted following queries into her moral qualities and chastity, and she was sealed into the cell in July of the same year. As she began her lifelong vow of seclusion, a burial service was read for she was considered dead to the sinful world, the cell being her symbolic tomb. **Christine's small cell was attached to the church and installed with a small opening through which she would receive food, and a squint window into the church that allowed her to participate in services**. Despite her oaths, Christine broke out of the anchorage after almost

three years and attempted to rejoin society. Having broken her holy vow, Christine was threatened with excommunication. It is perhaps this threat that led Christine to return to seclusion and isolation. By **October of 1332**, she had called on the Pope to pardon her sin on the condition that she return to her anchorage. **This she did, and there she remained for the rest of her mortal life**. That's one way, I guess, to attempt to deal with the desires of the flesh, but God provides a much better way … **Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh**.

WE EXHIBIT FREEDOM BY PRODUCING THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. This is where Paul provides us with a description of what it looks like when a person is walking in the flesh or in the Spirit.

- **The works of the flesh** (**Galatians 5:19-21 -- Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God**). These can be categorized into 4 groups all of which are self-centered: Sexual Sin, Relational Sin; Religious Sin; and Sins of Intemperance (lack of self-control).
- **The fruit of the Spirit** (**Galatians 5:22-23 -- But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law**). A couple of observations regarding them: **(1)** in all likelihood, this is not an exclusive list any more than the previous one. I would venture to say that another fruit of being filled with the Spirit is the desire to glorify Christ (**See John 16:14**) and perhaps another is boldness in sharing Christ (**See Acts 4:8**). **(2)** These are not gifts of the Spirit, but fruit. God produces them in us as we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

By way of review...

- **Freedom without responsibility equals libertinism – SHOW SLIDE ON LIBERTINISM --** When the exercise of our freedoms leads us into sin, then we are walking in the flesh.
- **Responsibility without freedom equals legalism – SHOW SLIDE ON LEGALISM --** Any attempt on our part to restrict the freedoms that believers have in Christ in order to control them is also evidence of walking in the flesh.
- **Freedom with responsibility equals love – SHOW SLIDE ON LIBERTY --** Those who exercise freedom responsibly ARE WALKING IN THE SPIRIT WITH THE RESULT THAT WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS.

This can only happen when we submit to the control of the Holy Spirit in our lives. On our own, we are not capable of exercising freedom responsibly. Several years ago, while attending a conference in Colorado with thirty-five or so of our students, I happened to walk through a narrow hallway that led into the main auditorium as one of our large group meetings was beginning. During a flurry of activity around me, I happened to hear a faint sound that caused me to stop and turn around just in time to notice a hummingbird that had found its way inside the building. It had entered through a door that was propped open. I noticed it because in an attempt to gain its freedom, the hummingbird was continually flying toward the window, through which it could see the sky and the trees, only to repeatedly have its progress impeded by the thick glass pane. The bird, though it desired to be free, found itself in a rather unique prison that it did not understand and from which it could not gain freedom. Though it took me several minutes, I eventually managed to corner the bird so that I was able to trap it in my hands. Interestingly enough, at that moment, the bird ceased to struggle as if it had simply resigned itself to its fate. Then, I carried it to the door and walked outside, where I opened my hands and watched as the little hummingbird quickly flew away. ***The only way it was able to gain its freedom was to come under the control of someone who had the power to set it free***. The same is true for us as well. **We must submit to the control of the Holy Spirit** (walk by the Spirit), **if we're ever going to experience real freedom, the kind that does not CAST-OFF moral restraint, does not attempt to CONTROL others, but SERVES one another in love. This is one way to know that you're growing up – you exercise freedom responsibly.**