

St. Paul: Saturday Session Thirty-four: Freedom of the Children of God

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Rom 8:20-21. Paul reminds us that all creation suffers from Adam's revolt, agonizing in futility. That sounds familiar. But when we see this frustration, we look in the wrong place. We look at what man had done to the cosmos. Instead, we should look at Christ. Jesus sets all creation free from slavery to sin. Once free, creation participates in the glory of the children of God. That's what we see if we accept Christ. This glory is His glory, as He unites creation to Himself. As the Trinity adopts us, and Christ's blood washes away our sins, we become God's children twice over. First, by creation, then by redemption, God joins us to His glory, manifest in Jesus Christ.

This glory is God's own life, where freedom abounds. Though we know very little about God's glory, we know a lot about freedom. Most of what we know about freedom is our struggle to escape limits. This escape is "freedom from" restraints. It's our primary concern. Only later in life do we discover "freedom for" good things. The ultimate good thing is God. Therefore, while Paul acknowledges freedom **from** entanglements, he emphasizes freedom **for** God. If freely choose God, then we are most free. If we do not choose God, then everywhere we look, we lose. Our frantic escapes from restrictions, entangle us more deeply in them. It's a familiar story, too boring to rehearse. What's new is release from sin's shackles, so that we can love fully. This is the only freedom worth having: freedom to accept God's love, and to return it.

Paul rejoices in this reciprocity. God initiates love, because He is Love. That's why He is Perfect Masculinity, Perfect Creator, Perfect Lover. All souls are feminine to God because we receive His love. First, we **are** because God loves us into existence. As we mature, we reciprocate His love. We are images and likenesses of God by returning love to Love. Practicing love, we realize that Love overflows all limits. Therefore, we love to love all God's creatures. Starting with the most perfect creatures, we love the persons God created. These are most obviously other humans. Less obviously, they include pure spirits, or angels. Just as Love Himself can't be confined, so our imitation of Him extends beyond all limits. As we negate limits, we extend our love. Our extended love **is** extended freedom. The more we extend love, the freer we get, as all the saints exemplify. In recent times, remember Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope John Paul the Great. Naturally, extended love unites ultimately with Love, Who is also Freedom. Paul summarized it well in 2 Thes 1:3: ***We owe continual thanks to God for you, brothers. It is a just debt because your faith knows no bounds, and the mutual love all of you have is steadily increasing.*** As love increases, so does freedom. It overflows.

Fr. Ceslaus Spicq, OP, in *Agape in the New Testament*, vol 2, p 110, investigates what "increase" means. "St. Paul is one of the few New Testament authors to use the verb "increase" (*pleonazo*), which he applies most often to the *charis* abounding in the hearts of the disciples (Rom 6:1; 2 Cor 4:15). Its usual sense in St. Paul is active growth and enlargement (Phil 4:17; cf Ps 71:21), and this sense is to be preferred in our text.

"The second verb, "to overflow" (*perisseuo*), is usually used intransitively in the New Testament. It means "to be more than enough, to be left over, to be present in abundance". St. Paul was very fond of the word, especially in its transitive sense: "to cause to abound, to prolong, to multiply, to make extremely rich". In Phil 4:12 it is opposed to "to be brought low, to be humiliated" (*tapeinousthai*). It conveys the idea of progress, of an increase in quantity or quality (Rom 3:7; 1 Cor 15:58), and consequently in perfection and excellence. (See also: 1 Thes 4:1; 1 Cor 8:8; 2 Cor 8:7; 9:8; 1 Cor 14:12; 2 Cor 3:9, from Spicq's footnotes.) In a comparison it means "to prevail, to surpass". The superabundance it conveys is often the result of a gift, particularly when God is the donor. God does not measure out His grace, but pours it out as profusely as He does His consolation (2 Cor 1:5), His hope (Rom 15:13) and His charity, which come to whoever prays for them. In a parallel text, St. Paul later said: ***The object of my prayer is that your love may become richer and richer***, Phil 1:9. God's lavish gifts should lead Christians to redouble their thanksgiving, and outdo themselves in the Lord's work, in zeal for charisms (1 Cor 14:12), and in almsgiving and good works (2 Cor 8:2)." Pp 110-111

As you see, richer love extends to all life's practical acts. So does freedom. It's a package deal. All of it grows together, ever richer and richer, until it reaches perfection. Spicq again: "To arrive at perfection or to possess a virtue in the highest degree possible is expressed by "to overflow". ***As you excel in every way, in faith, in eloquence, in knowledge, in every kind of zeal, and in the love we have stirred up in you, so too you should excel in this work of charity***, 2 Cor 8:7. The uses of these two verbs in the New Testament show that charity is an infused virtue intimately joined to *charis* and intended to grow. It seems to be the best of God's gifts, and to constitute a resume' of the Christian life, at least by its extension and power for exterior action. Even though it is an interior virtue, placed within the heart of the Christian, is it effusive by nature, and reveals itself in respect and service of the brothers in the midst of the community. That is why St. Paul asks the Lord to increase it to an overflowing fullness." 111

As Spicq points out: love's "extension and power for exterior action" is another way to say extended freedom. The children of God are increasingly free as they increasingly accept God's infusion of Himself, Love. The freedom of the children of God so far exceeds all other freedoms, that the two differ admirably. That's the view from the outside. The view from the inside is that this freedom flows from Love. Since God supplies infinite Love, He gives us infinite freedom. Paul uses the interior view, emphasizing Love, especially as it flows between its Source, God, and us. This is the vertical stream of Love. Once Love infuses us, we must share it. That is the horizontal Love-stream. First we accept Love. This is our first free act in God's Love-cycle. Love then expands our freedom, so that we freely return love to Love, and pass

Love around to everyone we meet. Love is that way: forever expansive. Life flows from love. Therefore Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to start at home with ***your love toward one another***, 1 Thes 4:9, then expand, as he says next.

Spicq reminds us that Paul's verb *philadelphia*, is "a reciprocal love, expressing itself in mutual kindnesses and services. They were not to stop at their coreligionists, however, but were to love all men, whoever they might be. The second zone, ***and to everyone***, included even enemies and persecutors, 1 Thes 4:12. Reciprocity was not possible in their case, and love for them was entirely disinterested and gratuitous, full of respect and kindness, expressing itself primarily in pardon and prayer." pp 111-112. Paul calls upon the Thessalonians' freedom to love. They had to be exceptionally free, as only Love can make them, to do what Paul urged them to do.

Paul's words inspire us, but he backed them with good example. ***May the Lord make your love increase till it overflows, as ours toward you***, 1 Thes 3:12. Jesus is our model of living love. As we imitate Him, we love others in some small measure as He loved us. Paul's love of his converts was the living basis for his inspiring words. Freedom follows love. Paul expresses this in Gal 5:1: ***It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery***. Freedom, understood as love, is why Christ delivered us from sin. Never again shall we subject ourselves to sin's slavery. In Paul's unified vision, love and freedom merge. They blend, as we agree to unite with Love, Who is Freedom. Because Jesus freed us from sin, we no longer subject ourselves to Torah, or Jewish law. In Christ, our sins are forgiven, and we can move from law to love, advancing ultimately to Love.

Paul sees the unity of love and freedom so clearly, that expressing it verbally is difficult. But he succeeds remarkably well. ***For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another***, Gal 5:13. Freedom is for love, and love for freedom. United, they enable us to live as Christ. This Christ-life is a medley of love and freedom. Jesus is the most perfect expression of this integrity. But we follow along, imitating Christ more or less. Paul urges us to imitate Jesus more. So his very next sentence, Gal 5:14 is: ***For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*** Perhaps this is the most perfect link that Paul gives, uniting love and freedom. Reflect upon it, pray it, and this union will grow in you.

Freedom is a two-edged sword. Paul puts it neatly: ***For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness***, Rom 6:20. Freedom is powerful. By choice, we can break our connection to God. Then we depart from righteousness, freely choosing to be slaves of sin. This does not make sense. But it does make sin. There is no benefit to our freely choosing sin, but we select sin anyway. Paul emphasizes how unhappy we were in this slavery, and how happy we are in the freedom of the children of God. Let us agree with Paul. Let us use our freedom to choose love, and gradually choose Love. Each step in His direction increases our freedom. Each step in sin's direction increases our slavery. We decide. ***For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord***, Rom 6:23.

Paul's unified view is true. God is Love, is Freedom, is Eternal Life. Jesus reveals all that. Jesus is revelation in the flesh. Christ is the answer to Paul's famous question: ***Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*** Rom 7:24. Therefore Paul thanks Jesus in the very next sentence. Paul did not mention that he had freely accepted Christ's redemption. That's obvious, but worth mentioning in this review of freedom. Paul hammers this message home with: ***For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death***, Rom 8:2. Paul's ringing proclamations survive the centuries because they express his profound love and freedom, given by Christ, accepted from Him, and put to work for Him. Jesus teaches us to be free in love, and to love in freedom.

That's why Paul respects each person's freedom. In Phil 1:14, Paul provides this exemplary statement: ***but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion, but of your own free will***. What Paul says to Philemon, he says to everyone. Christ offers freedom. If you accept it, Paul will not violate it. Because Paul understands the unity of love and freedom, he reveres each person's freedom. In some way, love and freedom are God's gifts, representing the ultimate Unity of the Trinity. Their Trinitarian unity transcends our comprehension, but fascinates us. Fortunately, if we freely accept God's gifts, we will contemplate this Unity for all eternity.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives, Heb 2:14-15. As usual, Paul unites the parts he analyzes, to provide a complete picture. Jesus became flesh for two major reasons. Paul mentions the main one: so that He could defeat death in mortal combat on the cross. Christ pays the fleshy debt in the flesh. That payment reversed Adam's deadly free choice to give the devil the kingdom of this earth. As Paul said at the beginning of our review: all creation groans under Satan's rule. God the Son relieved Adam's sons of Adam's sin. Jesus defeated Satan face-to-face on Calvary. By freely choosing all sin as His debt to pay, and paying this infinite price, Christ freed us from all sin. If we second His motion, and freely agree to this redemption, we become free **from** sin, and free **for** Love. Love is the proper object of freedom, the right objective for freedom, and the fulfillment of freedom. As we freely agree with Jesus, and freely accept His gift, we live in Love. Like a seed, Love grows in us by continual free choice to love. This is Christ-life.