

5. Called to be Free - Freedom, Desire, Technology and Creaturely Limits

Date: 1.9.24

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Being Human

Texts: Psalm 63, Galatians 5.13-26, (Romans 1.18-32), Mark 8:34-9.1

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.

One of my favourite sci-fi films is *The Matrix*. For those of you who haven't seen it, the premise of the film is that machines have taken over earth and they use human beings as batteries, while keeping them happy by plugging their brains into a vast virtual world called the Matrix. The characters try to break free from the Matrix to overthrow the machines. In one scene a computer programmer, Mouse, offers to introduce the main character, Neo, to a gorgeous woman he has seen in a training simulation. The other crew tease Mouse, saying, "The digital pimp, hard at work." Mouse responds, "Pay no attention to these hypocrites Neo. *To deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human.*"

We're continuing our series on Being Human. We're looking at who we are as human beings, so that we might then be able to answer the question, "How are we to live?" We've seen how we're both made in the image of God and yet also fallen. How Jesus is the true human being who both shows us how to be human and also rescues our fallen humanity. We've seen how in the church, the body of Christ, we're given a name and a family, a secure identity and a community in which to belong. Two weeks ago we looked at how we are a unity of both body and soul. We have an inner and outer life, and yet we are still a mystery to ourselves, known wholly only by God.

This week we're looking at Freedom, Desire, Technology and Creaturely Limits. I've chosen these issues because they loom large in the story we tell about who we are in Western culture. We see the intersection of freedom, desire and technology in that scene from the Matrix. "*To deny our own impulses [or desires] is to deny the very thing that makes us human.*" Let's unpack this story a little.

Desire and authenticity

First, our desires tell us who we are. We have a commitment to authenticity. "Be true to yourself" we're told. In a previous age, who you were was defined by your social location. You were Tom, the baker's son, and you could expect to be a baker. But we came to find social

hierarchies squashed our humanity. The 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “Man is born free, but everywhere is in chains.” On this account we don’t look to our place in society to tell us who we are, but we look inside, to our feelings, our desires. Society tries to shape us into its mould, so we have to throw off the chains of society to be authentic, true to ourselves. With a commitment to authenticity comes a moral obligation for the individual to both discover who they are and to live that out.¹ On the part of society a commitment to authenticity entails an expectation that society will recognise and affirm who I discover myself to be.

Freedom

Second, we have a commitment to freedom. Freedom is perhaps our most cherished value in Western societies. Mouse’s statement, “*To deny our own impulses [or desires] is to deny the very thing that makes us human,*” tells us what we understand freedom to be. Namely, freedom is freedom from restraint, freedom to pursue our own desires. And if it is from our desires, our feelings, that we discover who we are, then freedom to pursue our desires is freedom to be yourself. This is, as many have recognised, a negative conception of freedom. It is freedom *from*, not freedom *for*. That is to say, this account of freedom offers no goal, no “Good” towards which we should aim, beyond the satisfaction of our own desires. Indeed to suggest that there might be a Good which everyone should pursue would be to put limits upon our freedom. Any externally imposed limits are seen as an assault upon my humanity.

The setting for Mouse’s statement adds a third dimension: Technology. Technology offers the means to fulfil our desires. It gives us power to overcome what stands in the way of me fulfilling our desires. It gives the power for you to be who you are.

But the scene also begins to show some of the shortcomings and tensions within this view of freedom and desire. Mouse offers sexual release by virtual means, but at the same time it is a virtual substitute for real connection with a real person, albeit with all the social, personal and bodily complexity that real relationships involve. Or put another way, how does Mouse’s offer present the other person? They are there simply as a means to satisfy my desires, which is not how we want others to treat us, nor how we should treat others. If I want relationship, I can’t treat others however I want. I suggest that freedom as “freedom from”, is, in the end, a recipe for freedom from other people. It is a prescription for isolation and loneliness, and, at the same time, a licence to dehumanise others, turning them from people into means to our own ends.

¹ This is a summary of Charles Taylor’s account in, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, 1994

C.S. Lewis in his essay “The Abolition of Man” examines our “power of Nature”, through technology, whereby we can make of ourselves what we want. He offers 2 critiques. First, he says that the power to make of ourselves what we want, is in reality the power of some people to make of others what they want. Second, he argues that without an objective “Good” for which a person should aim, there is no way to judge between their desires, other than by the strength of the desire.² But leaves us at the mercy of the few who have the power to manipulate our desires. When it comes to the internet and social media, those few are wealthy tech owners who capture data about how we use their programs and then feed us what we “like” in order to keep us using their platforms. Their bottom line is not an objective or even coherent moral vision. It’s profit. And we are the product. The algorithms don’t have a moral compass, they just provide a feedback loop for our desires. Behind them lies the view of freedom outlined above - that we should be free to choose whatever we want.

But we don’t need to look very far in the world or in ourselves to see that not all our desires are good. Upon what basis can we judge between competing desires? Before we come to that question, I want to touch on two further aspects of social media. The first is that by giving us what we like, the algorithms push us into communities of people who agree with us. This means we encounter fewer stories or information that we disagree with. This encourages polarisation and groupthink and undermines a healthy ability to critically evaluate our positions, or to borrow Jesus’ words, to “take the log out of our own eye”.³

Second, I want to press a little more the idea that technology gives us “power of Nature”, and to ask, if our desires, how we think and feel defines who we are, is our body just another part of “Nature” that we might refashion to our will?

In an article, ‘Surviving the Metaverse’,⁴ feminist journalist Mary Harrington writes about being a socially awkward teenager somewhat grossed out by her body. She longed for a purer, highly, more magical, more real, more intense, less awkward world than that of her teenage body, and sought the closest thing to it: fantasy literature. (I can relate!) She reminds us of an early Christian heresy, Gnosticism. She writes,

“For the Gnostics, the world of matter was irredeemably gross and corrupt, the creation not of divine will but of the Demiurge, an entity viewed as antagonistic to

² C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Fount, 1978: 36-40

³ For an exploration of how this has impacted American democracy see Jonathan Haidt, ‘[Why the Past 10 years of American Life have been uniquely stupid](#)’, *The Atlantic*, May 2022

⁴ Mary Harrington - ‘[Surviving the Metaverse](#)’ *First Things*, February 2023

the Supreme Being. For the Gnostics, drawing on Platonist influences, the world of ideal Forms was God's original Creation; the world of matter was a clumsy copy by an envious lesser being."

Through secret knowledge (or *gnosis* in Greek, hence the name), you could transcend the world of matter and attain to the true world of the Spirit. Then comes her point:

"If the root of the Gnostic heresy is a longing for transcendent spiritual experience unburdened by the taint of embodiment, the Metaverse takes this longing a step further. Here, the relief proffered to those longing for bodiless transcendence takes the form of an individualism so radical it affords no space at all for shared meaning, save on an opt-in basis. And it does so with the aim of making money."

Harrington's point is that what is offered by the online world is a "tech-facilitated [imitation] of transcendent experience". We can be our "true" selves online, unencumbered by our messy bodies. Even more so, our bodies now can become a problem that we need to fix through technology, so that they conform with our "true" self - an interior sense of self that is discovered and reflected back to us through the disembodied world of social media.

Our "real" lives become what we experience online, mediated via smartphones. The irony is that the online keeps intruding into our actual, embodied, flesh and blood experience of life, so that we're unable to be fully present in the material world.

"the text message you try to reply to while talking to someone, the urgent email that coincides with the doorbell ringing, the constant nagging pressure to post what you are doing rather than experience it. We are endlessly enjoined to be somewhere other than where we are."

It is interesting to me that there is a correlation between the introduction of the smart phone with its camera and video and social media apps, and the rapid increase in the number of young people presenting as trans since 2012. Is this a symptom of the greater social - technological problem we have with social media and internet addiction?

You may have been wondering when (if at all) is Victor going to talk about the Bible? Well, that point has at last come! I want to suggest that the Bible offers a more compelling account of freedom and desire and also a way through navigating the perils of technology I've outlined. We've spent some time diving below the surface of our culture to examine the deeper currents that shape how we see ourselves and the world. But we've done so on the

conviction, from Romans 12:1-2,⁵ that we are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds, in order that we can offer our bodies to God in worship, and live the life of love he calls us to.

Let's turn to our main text, Galatians 5:13-26. The key verse for today is verse 13. If there's one thing to take home from this sermon, it's to memorise this verse and let it guide you.

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.

Notice that this verse does not dismiss or downplay freedom. Indeed Paul says a few verses earlier, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free!"⁶ But here is not freedom *from*, rather it is freedom *for*. Freedom has shape and content. "Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another humbly in love." This is what our freedom is for. Christ has set us free, not to do whatever we want, but so that we would serve one another humbly in love. Our freedom is for loving our neighbour as ourselves. So Paul continues, verse 14: "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Paul has in mind the horizontal or social dimension of human life. The command to "love your neighbour as yourself" condenses the back 6 of the 10 commandments: Honour your father and mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet anything that is your neighbour's. Paul continues with the contrast - what tears down community. "15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."

But what has Christ set us free from? It is not fundamentally social structures or limits imposed upon us by "Nature". In Galatians 5 Paul speaks of "the desires of the flesh". In 1 Peter 2 we read, "11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from desires of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." What does "the desires of the flesh" mean? The word "desire" is the Greek word *epithumeio* and literally means "over-desire". Once you start looking for it, it pops up all over the New Testament. It is the same word that is translated as "covet" in the 10th commandment. It's instructive that for Paul in verse 15 to indulge the flesh, to let the "over-desire" of the flesh have reign means biting and devouring others.

Disordered Loves

⁵ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. **2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

⁶ Galatians 5.1

For the great African theologian Augustine the Biblical idea of sin can be described as disordered loves or desires. Jesus says that we are first to love God and then to love our neighbour.⁷ Following the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, the apostle Paul says that our problem as human beings is that we exchange the truth about God and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator. Because of this, God gives us over to the “over-desires” of our hearts.⁸ Augustine puts it like this:

“The good which you love is from [God]. But it is only as it related to him that it is good and sweet. Otherwise it will justly become bitter; for all that comes from [God] is unjustly loved if he has been abandoned.”⁹

God is the source of all that is good in creation. We can only love created goods rightly as we see them as the good gift of God. If we don't love God first, then we won't be able to love his gifts properly. They will become idols for us. Our problem Augustine suggests is disordered desire. We love good things in the wrong way, and we can love the wrong things.¹⁰ In every desire then there is the seed of the deepest longing of our heart - which is for God. This is what Psalm 63 gives voice to.

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;
 I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you,
 in a dry and parched land where there is no water.
2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.
3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Jesus says, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin ... [but] if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” In Jesus, we see God's love for us, love as strong as death, love better than life. His love can break the chains of sin, and so it is that the Son can set us free. He frees us to love God and love our neighbour as we were made to do. But to do so we have to die. In our Gospel reading from Mark 8, Jesus says,

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Discovering and then living your truth - it's a way of trying to save your life. But Jesus calls us to lose our life for his sake. It's only when we do so that he gives our life back to us, and we'll find ourselves as we truly are, as God made us to be. In Galatians 5 Paul picks up Jesus'

⁷ Matthew 22.34-40

⁸ Romans 1.20-25

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.12(18)

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.12(22)

language when he says, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”¹¹

Seen from the perspective of Galatians 5, to give over to uninterrogated desire is to not to be authentic, rather it's to indulge the flesh, to open ourselves to becoming enslaved by what will pull us towards death - the destruction of ourselves and others. The flesh here is not our bodies as such, rather it is life apart from and set against God and his commands. We know that pull, don't we? When we're tired, or frustrated, or angry, or disappointed, or feeling threatened, we're pulled towards making selfish and destructive choices. And Paul is realistic about our experience of life.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Here Paul gives words to describe the inner conflict we experience between desires that pull us down towards death, and those that pull us up towards God, the source of all that is good.

The Christian question when it comes to freedom and desire is this: How can we walk by the Spirit and not the flesh? How can we stoke the fires of our deepest desire - for God's love? How might our desires be shaped so that we love what God commands and desire what he promises? We ask this that our souls will be satisfied as with the richest food. And We ask because of what Paul promises here - that walking by the Spirit will produce fruit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness and self-control.” It is as we walk by the Spirit that we will live the life of love that Christ calls us to, a truly authentic life as we become more like him.

So how do we walk by the Spirit? The answer comes in the metaphor Paul uses - walking. It's about putting ourselves in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The way our ancestors in the faith have found we can do this is through what are called spiritual disciplines. Habits and practices that cultivate an awareness of the Holy Spirit, that put us in a place where we are open to receive the fire and love of God, where we are prepared to listen and obey his prompting. Now there are heaps of these, and it's often about working out what works for you. But let me suggest 7, and you could try one or two.

- Sabbath - digital, rest and worship, dependence
- Corporate Worship - recentering on God, decentering self

¹¹ Galatians 5.25

- The Lord's Supper - emphasising our bodily existence, our need for forgiveness, spiritual nourishment, God's grace,
- Silence - switching off and attending to God
- Scripture and the Examen - Begin and End day with God not your phone.
- Thanksgiving - antidote to anxiety
- Reading and Listening and study
 - Increase our attention span, help us think critically, engage with others

Collect - 4th Sunday of After Easter

O Almighty God, who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful people; Grant unto your people, that we may love what you command and desire what you promise, so that, amid the many changes of this world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Resources

- Adele Alberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, IVP, 2022
- Tim Chester, *You Can Change*, IVP, 2008
- Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*, IVP, 2019. <https://www.thecommonrule.org/>
- Daniel Sih, *Raising Tech-Healthy Humans*, Publish Central, 2022
- John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Zondervan, 2009
- Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, Harper Collins, 1991