

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 5, 2015**

FREEDOM ... FOR WHAT?

Psalm 119:129-136

Today is my last opportunity to speak to you from this pulpit for a few weeks. No, I'm not leaving on another excursion like the trip to Israel from which Mary Sue and I just returned. Barring any last minute changes, I will undergo knee replacement surgery at INOVA Alexandria Hospital on Tuesday morning. It has been a long time coming. I have been dealing with arthritis in my right knee for several years. And I will be glad to say good-bye to the old knee and hello to a new one.

Just a little over a year ago, in June 2014, I had surgery of a different kind (something called "peripheral nerve decompression surgery") in the hope of alleviating or even eliminating the headache pain I have experienced for the last 15 years or so on the left side of my forehead – above my left eye and in the left temporal region. I am so grateful to you for all of your loving concern and prayers on my behalf. A year later, I continue to say that I am much better than I was before. My headaches in that region are not completely gone, but their intensity has been significantly reduced. And my energy level is considerably higher than it had been. For these blessings, for these answers to prayer, I give thanks and praise to God. And I thank you for your prayers and expressions of love and support. I am a blessed man.

* * * * *

This passage from Psalm 119 seems especially appropriate this weekend. As we celebrate our nation's independence and the blessings of liberty that are ours to enjoy, there is much to celebrate. Truly, as it says in Psalm 126:3:

The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

And yet, our celebration is – or ought to be – tinged with sadness as we ponder the collective moral and spiritual state of this nation we love. Not solely in light of the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage across America, though the Court's ruling and its reverberations throughout the land are indicative of the state of America's soul. Though not everyone may agree, I do believe this decision, along with Dred Scott (1857), Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), and Roe v. Wade (1973), will go down as one of the most regrettable and infamous Court decisions in American history.

Like the writer of Psalm 119, we who treasure God's Word, and seek to live according to it (119:9-11) with the help of the Holy Spirit, find ourselves more and more living as aliens in an alien culture, surrounded by people who have rejected God's Word or reinterpreted it to suit their own desires or whims. All of us are susceptible to doing this. None of us is immune. I'm not immune and neither are you. So we must continually guard our hearts. Since, as verse 130 says, "the unfolding of God's words gives light (and) understanding" to

those who sincerely seek them, we must continually look to God's Word and humbly submit to God's Word, which, the Westminster Confession of Faith reminds us, is the final and only infallible rule of faith and practice.

I echo the psalmist's petition in verse 133 and encourage you to make it your prayer as well:

Direct my steps according to Your word;
let no sin rule over me.

Like the writer of this psalm, I want my life to be governed by God and His Word, not by my selfish desires or appetites, not by sin of any kind, not by the devil, and not by the ever-changing winds of culture. I want to live my life *coram deo* – before the face of God, under His sovereign and gracious rule, and unto His glory. Which means living a counter-cultural life, because to live for God's glory and to look to His Word to direct our steps will nearly always put us at odds with the prevailing currents of culture. The gospel of today's culture is all about "me." It is focused on each one of us as individuals and our quest for personal fulfillment. It says that you are free to define yourself or your existence in any way you choose, and you are free to do whatever you think will make you happy or fulfill you as a person. You are your own final authority, and you can decide what is right in your own eyes. Which, of course, is reminiscent of a time in biblical history, in the days of the Judges, when there was no king in Israel, and "people did whatever they felt like doing" (Judges 17:6; 21:25, MSG).

This applies not just to the institutionalization and celebration of gay marriage in America, but in the sexual revolution as a whole that began in the 1960s or even earlier, casting off all restraint in the quest for sexual fulfillment.

The psalmist, however, tells us that the entrance and unfolding of God's words gives us light to live by (119:130). God's Word is like an explosion of light that shatters the darkness of the lies so many people believe today. Sadly, as Jesus said in John 3:19, many people prefer the darkness of the world they have constructed for themselves. They want nothing to do with Jesus or the light of God's Word. As he contemplates this situation in his own day, the psalmist is moved to tears. Look at verse 136:

Streams of tears flow from my eyes,
for Your law is not obeyed. (NIV)

What was true in the time of the psalm writer, what was true in the time of Jesus, is painfully true in our day as well.

My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not obey Your law. (ESV)

We shed tears of grief and sadness for America because our nation has embraced a sexual ethic that is abhorrent to the heart of God revealed to us in the Bible. I'm talking about gay marriage, yes – because it is the flashpoint and the most obvious indicator of how far from

God and His will we have wandered. But I'm talking about way more than just gay marriage. I'm talking about a prevailing spirit of sexual license that reigns supreme in our culture, a spirit that has completely discarded the biblical ethic that teaches that sexual intimacy is to be reserved for marriage, and that marriage, by God's design, is the union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of love and loyalty.

Completely separate from the tragedy of our embrace of gay marriage is this: In a survey conducted by the dating web site ChristianMingle.com, Christian singles between the ages of 18 and 59 were asked: "Would you have sex before marriage?" 63 percent of the single Christian respondents said yes. Given the way the popular culture media bombards us with messages that normalize and glamorize sex before and outside of marriage, you may be surprised the number isn't higher. But when you consider the Bible's clear teachings and the classical Christian sexual ethic which properly reserve the pleasures of sexual intimacy for marriage, the fact that so many professing Christians are choosing to disregard it is terribly disconcerting.

This is not to suggest that it is not, or may not be, challenging to be faithful to God in this area of our lives. Especially in times like these. New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N. T. Wright makes the point that "the entire biblical sexual ethic is deeply counter-intuitive." He says: "All human beings some of the time, and some human beings most of the time, have deep heartfelt longings for kinds of sexual intimacy or gratification which do not reflect the Creator's best intentions for His human creatures Sexual restraint is mandatory for all, difficult for most, extremely challenging for some. God is gracious and merciful" – Hallelujah! – "but this never means that His creational standards don't really matter after all."

God's standards *do* matter. And they are for *our* good. They are for our good personally. They are for the good of our marriages and families. They are for the good of society.

Ours is not the first generation or society to be characterized by sexual freedom leading to sexual anarchy, with the predominant idea that pretty much anything goes with pretty much anyone, as long as we're not talking about children. "Hooking up," "friends with benefits," multiple partners, premarital sex, living together (outside of marriage), adultery (which is sexual relations with someone other than your husband or wife), homosexual relations, pornography – all of these are out-of-the-closet and so commonplace in our culture today that it seems futile to stand against them. Sort of like Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

But Paul took a stand against the sexual immorality that was poisoning the church in 1st-century Corinth. He didn't back down. He spoke the truth in love to the Corinthians. Which is the challenge and the mission of the church in every place and time, including our own. And which is why it is so important for us to understand and embrace and teach and live by the biblical ethic for marriage and sex.

I want to walk you quickly through what Paul says about this in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. If you want to follow along in your Bible or the pew Bible or your phone or I-pad or any other device you have, please do. It is 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. There Paul says:

12 “Everything is permissible for me” (he is quoting a slogan popular in Corinth) – “but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me” (there is that slogan again) – “but I will not be mastered by anything.”

In other words: “I will not allow anything to gain control over me.” The danger is that in asserting our freedom in Christ, we may end up becoming a slave to the things we do or desire. This is not what true freedom in Christ is nor what it is for. The grace of God that sets us free from sin and guilt does not render morality irrelevant. It does not mean that God doesn’t care about how we live.

13 “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” (another popular Corinthian slogan) – “but God will destroy them both.”

John Piper says it is possible the Corinthians had a similar slogan for sex: “Sex for the body and the body for sex!” In effect, they equated eating a burger and fries with having sex. They thought it was perfectly OK to have sex any time with anyone you like, because what you do with your body sexually has no more moral significance than what you eat. To which Paul replies: “Not so fast, my friends! May it never be so!”

Continuing in verse 13: “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

In other words, God cares about your body, how you take care of it, and what you do with it. Your body is not to be used for immoral purposes whether you’re 16 or 106 or any other age. Your body has been given to you as an instrument with which to serve God’s purposes in this world. God cares about your body. In fact, the body is so important to God that He will never throw our bodies away.

14 “By His power God raised the Lord (Jesus) from the dead, and He will raise us also.”

The resurrection is God’s declaration not only that He has power over death but also that our bodies matter to Him. Our bodies may lie in the ground for a while, but one day God is going to raise us from the dead and give us new, resurrection bodies.

15 “Do you not know” (Paul uses this expression six times in 1 Corinthians 6) “that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

16 “Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’

17 “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one with Him in spirit.”

Prostitution was a presenting problem in Corinth, largely due to the presence of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which employed more than a thousand temple prostitutes as priestesses. Sex was part of the ritual of worship there and was obviously what attracted those

who came to worship. But Christians were – and are – to abstain from sexual immorality, even if it is accepted and celebrated in our culture. What was true with regard to prostitution in Corinth is true today regarding homosexual sex, adultery, and every other form of sexual immorality.

18 “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but when you sin sexually, you sin against your own body.

19 “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own,

10 “for you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body.”

We shouldn't expect people who don't share our allegiance to Christ to live by our values. We may wish they did, but more and more, we are seeing that they don't. But for us as followers of Christ, for us as sinners saved by grace, for us who were bought and paid for and set free from the tyranny of our sinful ways and our sinful desires by Jesus in His suffering and death on the cross, it is crystal clear, isn't it, that we are to glorify God in and with our bodies? Because we are not our own. You are not your own. Your body is not your own. It does not belong to you. Your body is the temple, the dwelling place, of the Holy Spirit. You belong to God.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul said: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Know this: The freedom for which Christ has set you free is not a license to do whatever you want whenever you want with whomever you want. The extraordinary thing about God's liberating grace is not that it makes us free to sin, but that it makes us free not to sin.

Celebrate this freedom in your life. Use your body and your freedom to glorify God. Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.