Freedom is one of those things that most people in the United States are in favor of, in sort of the same way that people in Wisconsin are in favor of the Green Bay Packers. The only thing is the Packers are fairly easy to understand – they are a football team and people who like them want them to win games. Freedom on the other hand is much more difficult to understand. For example, should we be free to be a heroin addict and if we are a heroin addict are we actually free or are we enslaved to our addiction? Or think about this: Should I be free to purposefully drive my car through your living room or produce a movie staring Brad Pitt? -- probably not because those are bad things to do. And if we think about it we realize that there are all sorts of things that we are prevented from doing by law in the United States and yet we call ourselves a free people. And so today, as we are a few days out from the Fourth of July, I thought it might be worth reflecting a bit on freedom and what it means, at least in the Christian understanding. And fortunately the lectionary cooperated very well today; so let’s have a listen to St. Paul.

He says, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” He continues on with this discussion by giving a list of things we shouldn’t do, things like, fornication, licentiousness, jealousy, anger, dissensions, factions, envy [and] carousing.” He wraps it all up by saying, “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” So to recap Paul tells us that Christ sets us free. Then he gives us a long list of forbidden behavior and he wraps it all up by saying that if we do these forbidden things then we will not inherit the kingdom of God. So what kind of freedom is this? I mean generally speaking freedom does not include a long list of prohibited behaviors. After Jefferson stated that we were “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” he did not follow it up with a list of stuff he wished that King George would prevent the colonists from doing. So what is going on? How can freedom be found in the restricting of certain actions? Well, for the answer to this I want to turn to G.K. Chesterton. The quote I am about to read comes in the context of a discussion about rules and discipline as found in Christianity. He states,

“Doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground...We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff’s edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But [if] the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice…when their friends returned to them they [would find them] all huddled in terror in the center of the island.”

The argument presented here is basically that it is only in allowing for some discipline and restrictions on our actions that we can find true freedom. Which may sound strange in our day and age where we tend to attack many of those very rules and regulations that St. Paul listed in his discussion, but let’s think it through. This may be a bad example but let’s think about rule number eight in the Ten Commandments. Number eight says that we should not steal. Now let’s say we have decided that this was a rule for a very different time and that we have evolved past such things and that not stealing inhibits our freedom to get what we want. So what does this new freedom look like? Well let’s say I go home today and see that my lawnmower is not working and to remedy this I go over and steal my neighbors lawnmower. I have solved my problem, but if this is the same reality for everyone, my life will change as well. I must now lock everything up, get a security system and sleep with one eye open because at any moment my neighbors may come after my George Foreman Grill. The freedom I gained in being able to steal has left me in a state where every moment is consumed with ensuring that people do not steal from me. A moment of ease turns the world into a frightening and unstable mess, a place where chaos rules.

The rules that Paul tells us to follow are like the walls of which Chesterton speaks. They are walls that keep out the chaos and uncertainly to allow us to fully enjoy the freedom that is found in Christ. And as countercultural as this may sound this is a lesson we desperately need to relearn. Freedom in recent years has been defined as tearing down the very walls that allow us to be truly free and those who seek to keep these walls are accused of being busy bodies, spoiling people’s good time. But we Christians do not look askance at jealousy, anger, dissensions, envy and carousing or any of the other items that Paul prohibits because we are a bunch of fuddy-duddies who refuse to get with the times, we look askance at them because we know that a world filled with such things will be a less pleasant and ultimately less free place in which to live. When restraints on human behavior break down you don’t get the dawning of the Age of Aquarius you get Sarajevo in the early 90’s.

The other day I received an email from my alma mater, which contained an article about the valedictorian’s speech at this years graduation. I usually ignore graduation speeches because they generally contain vapid advice like the kind Freddie Benson offered in the film *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* when he said, “it is better to be truthful and good...than to not.” But this one promised a reference to Daedalus and Icarus so I read on. If you remember this story from Greek myth it is about a father, Daedalus and his son Icarus. In this story Daedalus has angered King Minos and is punished by being imprisoned in a labyrinth on the island of Crete with his son Icarus. To escape Daedalus fashions two sets wings out of wax. The plan is for he and his son Icarus to use these wings to fly away from the island. There is one catch however. Because the wings are made of wax Daedalus warns Icarus that he must not fly to close to sun or the wings will melt. Icarus obeys for a while but then gets so excited that he heads too close to the sun. As predicted the wings melt and Icarus plunges to the sea where he drowns. So what do you think the valedictorian said the real lesson of this story was? Well I was expecting a Clint Eastwood, “a man’s got to know his limitations” type of pronouncement, but that is not where he went. Let me quote him so I am not accused of making this up. He said the lesson was to, “Put aside that fear to fly too close to the sun.” Somehow from a story, which is all about willful restraint, he somehow gathered that Icarus’ old man was keeping him down with all his rules. But, you see, Icarus was only free to fly when he lived within the constraints his father gave him. By not following the rules he lost not only his freedom to fly, but his life as well.

Freedom for the Christian is not found in doing our will but rather in doing God’s will. And for this freedom to work we may find ourselves being prevented from doing things that we really feel like doing. Icarus had a really good time doing his own will until his wings melted and he plunged to his death. It seems contradictory, but like Icarus our true freedom is found in our obedience to God and the restraints that he puts on us. So as we go into this week where we remember and celebrate our freedom, we should remember that true freedom comes not in following our own will and desires but through following God’s perfect will both this day and forevermore.