

“An Anchor for the Soul: Consumed”

Hebrews 12:29-13:6

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Tomorrow is Independence Day, the Fourth of July. A national holiday set aside to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It's the day we stop to celebrate freedom. But what do we mean when we talk about freedom? Maybe you're thinking about the Rolling Stones song that goes, "I'm free to do what I want any old time." Is that what we mean? It's a free country. I can do whatever I want, any old time, right? Uncle Sam says, "not so fast." In fact in a recent article Steve Forbes explains that the Code of Federal Regulations is 80,000 pages long and lists around 300,000 criminal offenses. That's just federal crimes. It doesn't include state and local regulations. So what does it mean to be free?

There are basically two types of freedom, two ways to think about what it means to be free. One way is that I'm free *from* something. For the signers of the Declaration of Independence, it was freedom *from* the oppressive rule of King George. Anyone who is in captivity or bondage of some kind thinks a lot about this kind of freedom.

But there's another side to freedom – freedom *for* something. For example, most of us don't consider our career to be a form of captivity. But when you retire you may find that you are suddenly free to do other things you enjoy. You can fish more or travel or better yet volunteer with one of the church's ministries! You have the freedom to do things that you didn't in the past. It's freedom with a purpose.

We find both these ideas of freedom in our first passage from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The slavery he mentions is the bondage that comes from sin. Paul reminds us that Jesus has set us free from that. That's the freedom *from* – freedom from the effects of sin, which is death. But it doesn't mean we are free to do what we want any old time. Verse 13

says, "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." Real freedom is the freedom to serve Christ by serving others. That's what we find in our reading from Hebrews.

We pick up today where we left off last week. "Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." Experts say that 30 years ago if a fire started in a home you had an average of 14 to 17 minutes to escape before the house was completely engulfed in flames. Today, because of all the synthetic materials in our homes, that average is only 2 to 3 minutes. When you think about that, the idea of God as a consuming fire is not very comforting. The first time we find this idea in the Bible is in Deuteronomy 4. The context is Moses warning the people against idolatry. He says, "The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." A consuming fire destroys. This is a serious warning and we should take it seriously.

But there's another way to think about this. Fire can be used to burn away impurities in things like precious metals. Fire is also a purifier. The only things destroyed are the things that don't belong. God wants to work that way in your life. God wants to consume all your thoughts and actions and relationships. He wants to be the most important thing in your life and He will burn away everything else. What God wants is for you to worship Him with reverence and awe. Not just on Sunday. All the time.

Let's look at another situation from the life of Moses. After 40 years herding sheep in the wilderness, one day God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. One of the key verses in that story says that the bush was burning but was *not* consumed. But we just heard that God *is* a

consuming fire. Which is it? If you read the rest of the story of Moses you find that while the bush was not consumed, Moses was. For the rest of his life Moses was consumed by his relationship with God. It's what he thought about and talked about; he went wherever God led him. After Moses died, the book of Deuteronomy ends by saying, "there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face."

What consumes you? What do you think about and talk about? How do you spend your time and your money? Is God a consuming fire in *your* life? Your relationship with Christ should be consuming like that. As we look at the Hebrews 13 we find that if God consumes our life it shows up in three ways: in our relationship with God, our relationships with other people, and our relationship with our possessions.

Worship is the place where our relationship with God is expressed. When I am consumed by God I cannot wait to worship. When I have turned my back on Jesus I find worship to be a chore. Hebrews 13:1-4 shows us how God shows up in our relationships with other people. This is really a picture of what the church should look like. Verse 1 says, "Let brotherly love continue." This is the mark of a true Christian. 1 John 4:7-8 says, "let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." As the old song goes, "they'll know we are Christians by our love." Jesus' last commandment to his disciples was to love one another as he loved them.

Romans 12 tells us, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

That brings us to verse 2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." So verse 1 is about loving other church members. Verse 2 literally reads, "do not forget to love strangers." In the ancient world one of the things that interested people in Christianity was their hospitality. There were few inns and most of them were more like brothels. Christians would open their homes for strangers to stay. The writer of Hebrews says don't forget to do that. I don't know about you but loving friends seems a whole lot easier than loving strangers.

But this is God's marketing plan to grow His church. It always has been. A pastor friend of mine says, "the church grows at the speed of friendship." But the truth is we don't have those kinds of relationships. A recent study done by Gordon-Conwell Seminary revealed that twenty percent of non-Christians in North America don't even know a Christian. But another recent study by Thom Rainer indicates that these non-Christians would like to know a believer. Listen to a couple of the responses he received. One person said, *"I'm really interested in what they believe and how they carry out their beliefs. I wish I could find a Christian that would be willing to spend some time with me."* Another said, *"I really would like to visit a church, but I'm not particularly comfortable going by myself. What is weird is that I am 32-years old, and I've never had a Christian invite me to church in my entire life."*

In verse 3 we find that as Christians we are to not only care for but identify with those who are mistreated. We should be standing up for those who can't defend themselves, especially the unborn. We are called to go wherever there are injustices because that's what Jesus did. It doesn't mean we can fix them but we are called to minister to the people. Verses 4 and 5 address two of the hottest topics around, sex and money, and we don't have time to talk about them today so that's where we will pick up next week.

But it comes down to the same issue. God is a consuming fire and He wants to consume *all* areas of your life. The prophet Jeremiah said, "If

I say, 'I will not mention [the LORD], or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." He was consumed with God. We should be, too. Our love for Jesus should change everything about us – our thoughts, our actions, our relationships, the way we spend our time and

our money. Our homes should be places where people meet Jesus and our church should be a place where we love, serve, and worship. That's real freedom and that's my hope and prayer for you.

Amen