



WHAT IS FREEDOM?

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 1:1-5

First Message

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I began to study the book of Galatians almost by accident two years ago when I was on sabbatical. As part of my sabbatical, I took a class on the parables of Jesus, taught by Eugene Peterson, in Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. While I was there, I decided to take a class, taught by Gordon Fee, on the book of Galatians. I had never done an in-depth study of Galatians. I knew that it had a lot to say about religious legalism, but I didn't think that would apply much to me, since I would not have characterized my life then as one of religious do's and don'ts. I thought the class might be academic, perhaps even boring, but I felt it might be helpful for teaching others who struggled with legalism. I was greatly mistaken. In the book of Galatians I discovered the story of my life. As I became more familiar with the text, I experienced much joy, but also much pain as I encountered the living God revealed in his living word. No book of the Bible has had a bigger impact on me as a Christian.

I feel that the message of Galatians is what we most need to hear in the church today. Not many among us would call themselves legalists, but, to use the phrase that Paul uses in Galatians, if we are "living under the law," then that is what we are — legalists. I have to plead, "Guilty!" here myself. I am a legalist, although prior to my studies in this book I never would have characterized myself as one.

Perhaps I can illustrate. I know that I am a legalist because, when I make a list, I can't rest until every item is checked off. I know I am a legalist because I have to start showing a video by 8 o'clock so I can get to bed by 10. I know I am a legalist because I have to eat all the food on my plate. I know I am legalist because I feel guilty for not returning a phone call. I know I am a legalist because I must see every display when I visit a museum. I know I am a legalist because I am concerned about what someone thinks of me when I miss a meeting. I know I am a legalist because I tend to put my children under the law and motivate them by guilt. I know I am a legalist because I put myself under law and try to meet its requirements through my own efforts. I know I am a legalist because I impose the law on others. In fact, I impose a higher standard on others than I do on myself.

Some of you can identify with my list. You are easily persuaded to conform to external standards, to laws, whether moral, ethical, or religious. You place your-

selves under tremendous pressure, because you are being controlled by external factors. Living under the law is tantamount to being controlled by someone or something that tells us how to behave, so that external law defines and controls our behavior. Here is another way to state this: Living under the law is being controlled by anything other than the Spirit of God. Putting someone under law means that you are seeking to control them, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Legalism can come in many different guises, but the issue always is control.

The opposite of law, of course, is freedom. But what do we mean by freedom? Eugene Peterson has a word on how some people define freedom, which is not freedom at all: "Sometimes I want to be free the way my dog is free. I fantasize a dog's life because my dog is not subject to anxieties. But my dog is not free—she is a creature of instinct and reflex. It is not possible for her not to do most of what she does. The instincts are powerful within her, the conditioned reflexes thoroughly imposed upon her. And my leash is frequently there to restrain and guide her. It's a simple, happy life with many pleasures and delights. But it is not free" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 157).

Freedom means different things to different people. Today, we hear a lot about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from responsibilities, freedom from the fear of failure. The fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, which we just celebrated, brought before us one image of freedom. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," went the words of a popular song of the sixties. Freedom is hard to define, isn't it? But, when we talk about inner freedom, something deep inside of us resonates with affirmation. Yes, we want to be free. But something holds us back.

Inner freedom has to do with the very essence of our being. And this is the theme of the book of Galatians. The Greek words for freedom are used 36 times in the New Testament. Paul uses them 28 times in his letters, 10 times alone in Galatians. The purpose of this book is clear: it is to get Christians out from under the law and into freedom in Christ, to have Spirit replace Torah in our lives. Galatians reveals why we struggle so much with law. It identifies the key ingredient to becoming free, and how we can enjoy our freedom in Christ day in and day out.

As we begin our studies, I want to think through with you the meaning of freedom. For our text, we will take the opening five verses of Galatians.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (Gal 1:1-5, NASB)

The writer, Paul, describes himself an apostle, a “sent one.” Apostles were personally chosen, called and commissioned by Jesus Christ, and authorized to teach in his name. Notice that Paul is not alone. The letter comes from him and “all the brethren who are with me.” Paul was involved in community. Others shared the views expressed in his letter, although he was the only apostle among them.

Next, Paul makes a statement about his authority. He is an apostle “not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.” Paul’s authority was not in any sense inherited, learned, or passed down from man; it did not come from any human source. The apostle’s authority, says one writer, “is not a genetic endowment, but a divine assignment.” According to Paul, God had the credentials to grant such authority because he raised Jesus from the dead.

So at the outset Paul makes a forceful statement regarding his authority. There were some who sought to discredit his authority and his gospel. If he were not an apostle, men could, and no doubt would, reject it. This issue will take on added importance, as we will see later in the book.

The recipients of this letter were the “churches of Galatia,” referring to not one but several churches. A little background on the Galatians will be helpful. In the third century B.C., a people from Gaul (modern-day France) sacked the city of Rome and migrated all the way through Greece to Asia Minor and the Anatolian Peninsula. In the second century B.C., Asia Minor was conquered by Rome and incorporated into a province called Galatia. This area was larger than ethnic Galatia; it included the Lycaonians, the Phrygians and the Pisidians. Scholars have debated whether Paul’s letter was written to the people of the original settlement (Northern Galatia), or to this Roman province (Southern Galatia). Those who think the letter was written to southern Galatia identify Galatia with the churches planted by Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey, when Paul visited Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-14:26). If in fact the apostle

was writing to Northern (ethnic) Galatia, then these are the churches referred to in Acts 16:6 and 18:23.

Although this Southern theory, as we could call it, is easier to explain, I rather hold to the Northern view, that the letter was addressed to the people of the original settlement (Northern, ethnic Galatia). This was the view held by the early church fathers. Furthermore, Paul addresses these people as “foolish Galatians” in chapter 3, a description much more likely to be given to an ethnic group. (For example, I still refer to myself as a Nebraskan, even though I live in California.) It seems Julius Caesar agreed with Paul’s assessment. Describing the Gauls, the emperor wrote, “the infirmity of the Gauls is that they are fickle in their resolves, fond of change, and not to be trusted.” The bottom line, however, is that the recipients of this letter were Gentile Christians with whom Paul had a personal relationship.

This brings us to a word about why Paul wrote this letter. Certain opponents and agitators had entered into churches founded by the apostle in Galatia, seeking to teach and convince believers that they should place themselves under the Torah, specifically with respect to circumcision (5:2-3; 6:12-13), the religious calendar (4:10, from Chronicles), and the Jewish food laws (2:11-13), the identity markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. These agitators were saying that faith in Christ was not enough. In order to be true children of God, they held, the Galatians needed to complete what they had begun with Christ. Paul had heard about this false teaching, and the indignant apostle responded by writing this passionate letter.

The theme of the book, as we have already seen, is freedom. Paul writes, “you were called to freedom, it was for freedom that Christ set you free.” In his word of greeting in the introduction, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age,” the apostle defines what he means by freedom. Following his wish for “grace and peace,” he uses two phrases that capture for Christians the two ways they are free as a result of their relationship with God.

The first phrase is that the Lord Jesus Christ “gave Himself for our sins.” Here the apostle is describing our freedom from slavery to, and from the power of sin. This is the great doctrine of justification. We are born into sin, separated from God, but God sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. In the atonement, all of our sins, past, present, and future, have been paid for. John Stott comments: “The death of Jesus Christ was primarily neither a display of love, nor an example of heroism, but a sacrifice for sin” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 17).

The Bible says that there is nothing we can do in ourselves to deal with the problem of sin. God must do it

all. And the wonderful declaration of the gospel is that God has done it all. There is nothing we can do to add to his finished work. When I wake up in the morning, I do not have to think about the wrongs I committed in the past. All I need to do is come to God, confess my sin, and he is faithful to forgive me. I am free from guilt and condemnation.

The Bible tells the stories of men and women who learned this truth and were forgiven of their sins. Rahab, the harlot, welcomed the spies and was saved. David, after his encounter with Bathsheba, found forgiveness. The woman at the well heard from the lips of Jesus the way to reconciliation with God. The woman caught in adultery was sent on her way, forgiven. A woman in Luke 7 wept tears of joy and relief at the feet of Jesus. Bartimaeus, Zaccheus, a blind man, a paralytic, the apostle Peter, even Paul, who described himself as the “worst of all sinners,” all found this forgiveness. Forgiveness for sin is the very heart of the gospel.

But the gospel doesn't end with forgiveness. There is deliverance, too. The second phrase that Paul uses in these opening words of Galatians introduces us to a second freedom which is ours as Christians: “that He might deliver us out of this present evil age.” Christians have been “rescued from this present evil age.” Paul is talking about sanctification. Certainly, sanctification does not mean that we are taken out of the world and protected from everything that might come our way. Our sins are forgiven, yes, but we are not physically removed from the earth and transported to some utopia where there are no wars and no conflicts and we live out the rest of our years in peace and tranquillity. Sadly, however, this is what most of us expect when we become Christians. And, ironically, it is the very thing that we are trying to produce for ourselves in our quest for freedom.

The words “present age” refer to the age of Adam, the age of fallen humanity. The implication is that there is coming a future age. “Delivered” denotes not removal from, but rescue from this present age. The emphasis is upon the act of rescue, not from the world, not from limitations or boundaries, but from sin, the law, the control of the world and of others, from anything that separates us from God and his purposed creation and destined redemption.

Christ rescues us out of this age, with its control mechanisms, and allows us to enter into the age which is “already, but not yet.” The two ages are running parallel with each other, and it required the work of God for us to enter into the age to come. “The gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage” (J. B. Lightfoot, quoted by Stott, *Galatians*, 17). Paul uses another phrase at the end of the book that captures this notion of freedom. He says, “But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to

me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). Paul is saying that he is separated from the world and the world is separated from him. He has entered into a different dimension, one that he longed for but which was unattainable without the work of Christ on the cross.

This then is the freedom that is ours in Christ: We are rescued from this present age, separated from the world, and we are already living in the “age to come.” No longer are we controlled by the world system, religious legalists, law-producing parents, critical spouses, or by our incessant desires to please people. We have responsibilities, and we must face conflicts, but we are free from the control and motivation and pain that these things produce. Our lives are controlled by the Spirit of God, in community with the body of Christ.

Now there are certain things that we know we don't have to submit to because we are Christians. For example, if someone tells you that you have to be circumcised in order to be saved, you don't have to submit to that, and you know it. But how do you respond when someone insists that you have to attend a certain function, otherwise they will think less of you and your faith? Will you go because you are concerned about appearances? Freedom from constraints such as these is what we long for: freedom from legalism, living under the law, from the control of anything but the Holy Spirit. But most of us run after various pursuits to attain this freedom. We try a little harder. We go on a cruise, have an affair, make more money, give our money away. We run, deny, escape, pretend. Why do we do these things? It is because we desire the freedom that only God can grant.

Paul is talking about an issue that is far deeper than mere freedom from sin. Trying to be good will not produce the kind of freedom the apostle is referring to. It is not enough to refrain from gossip, anger, jealousy, swearing, or checking out *Playboy* magazine. All of these resolutions are good in themselves, but avoiding these things will not change our hearts. No amount of law-keeping will connect us to the Father or satisfy our deep hunger for freedom. What we need is a genuine spirituality that is truly free. Our goal should not be to live a moral life, but to experience a deep spirituality. And these are not the same things. Morality, external behavior, can actually be opposed to true spirituality. There is a deeper reality, a deeper truth than the law, and that is freedom in Christ.

The purpose then for Christ's death is not merely that we might be forgiven and thus qualify for heaven. It is so that we may live a new life, the life of the age to come, the life that God intended us to live. In Galatians, Paul presents us with a two-fold freedom: freedom from sin, and freedom from legalism. These are the two arenas where we do battle; Romans 6 deals with the first, Romans 7 with the second.

I like to illustrate the Christian life by comparing it to a journey by car. We travel a wonderful road, and there are many interesting things to see and experience, but there is a problem: the car is out of alignment. If we take our hands off the wheel, we will drift either right or left. On one side is a ditch called legalism, on the other side, a ditch called indulgence to sin. Usually we have a bent to one side or the other. Satan is always working to draw us to one extreme or the other. In order to avoid sin, we drift towards legalism, but then we get tired of trying so hard that we over-compensate, head for the other ditch, and we find ourselves in unholiness and license. After a while, sin begins to make us feel so miserable that we head back across the road into legalism. But the gospel proclaims that we are free in both arenas, and it calls us to a new life altogether. We are rescued "from this present evil age." We are rescued from both the rut of legalism and the rut of license.

Notice Paul says that all of this is "according to the will of our God and Father." Freedom is God's idea, not ours. We are called to freedom; it was for freedom that Christ set us free. And God is the Author of this freedom. It is his glorious will that we live free lives. If we are going to be free, therefore, the process doesn't start with us, it starts with God and with worship. We are made free not just for our own satisfaction, but for the glory of God the Father.

As we begin this book, I have a vision for us as a congregation. Let us think about and pray through this marvelous notion of freedom. Chapters 5 and 6 of this book are about living in community, and that is where the things that Paul instructs us about are worked out — in community. Most of us are living under law because we are being controlled by others, but these relationships have to be placed on a proper footing. Are you truly free? Think about the things that control you and why, and then share them with another believer and begin to pray for the gospel freedom that Paul proclaims is ours in Christ. Nicolas Berdyaev said: "God has laid upon man the duty of being free, of safeguarding freedom of spirit, no matter how difficult that may be, or how much sacrifice and suffering it may require" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 15).

Last fall, I began this process (and I emphasize that it is a process) in my own life, and I started to feel a freedom I never before experienced. My wife calls it my "spiritual awakening." My desire to enter fully into the gospel message that Paul so clearly articulates in this text has increased with each passing day. I hope I can share with you, out of my weakness and inadequacy, the truth of this book. My passion is to fully experience and enjoy the blessed truth that I have been fully "rescued from this present age." I hope that this will become your passion as well.

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