



LAW AND FREEDOM - INTRODUCTION TO GALATIANS

SERIES: GALATIANS - JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM

Galatians 1:6–9

1st Message

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As has been the case for the past few summers, we are again doing a summer series. This year we are taking a journey from law to freedom in the book of Galatians. Our series title is #free2live, thanks to the younger members of our staff. And a picture that will show up repeatedly through the summer is that of a person jumping for joy imposed on the Celtic trinity knot that is represented in our window. So, we have a bit of modern culture combined with traditional Christian symbolism. Our series will extend for ten weeks through family fun day and will be a team effort. Galatians has had a powerful influence on my life and I hope this study will be an encouragement to you all.

There are two dangers to the spiritual life. One is license—"I can do anything I want to do, because Jesus will forgive." The other is legalism or living under the law—"I must keep all the rules and regulations." And often we alternate between these two extremes in the Christian life. We ping pong back and forth. The rules are too hard so we give up and sin. The consequences of sin aren't good, so we go back to rules. The book of Romans deals with the sin issue while Galatians deals with legalism, living under the law as opposed to living free. That is what we are going to talk about this summer.

The key verse is: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1 ESV).

In this letter, law is associated with slavery, immaturity, sin, flesh, and control, while freedom is associated with Christ, promise, gospel, grace, new creation, and Spirit.

Let me begin with an illustration to give you an idea of what we will be talking about. For the past couple of years I have tried to augment my exercise routine with swimming. I am a horrible swimmer. I sink in the water. I've much preferred other forms of exercise—running, basketball, cycling. But I thought swimming might be good for me even though it is hard. So, I started by swimming 20 laps and increased each week to 30, 40, and 50.

One day I was talking to an older gentleman that I see regularly in the pool. I asked him how long he swims for. He said, "an hour or hour and a half." I said, "How do you keep track of the laps?" His reply floored me; he said, "I don't count. When I swim, my mind thinks about other things." The thought had never crossed my mind. So, the next time out I thought I would give it a try. Since 50 laps took me about a half an hour I decided to simply swim for that length of time. The experience was completely different. I got the same workout, probably swam the same number of laps, but it was so enjoyable and relaxing. I could pray and focus on other matters. It didn't seem like work. In fact, I found myself swimming for longer and longer each time out.

Hopefully that gives you a picture of what can change between living under law and living free in the Spirit. Living under law is a system of counting, measuring, earning, and performing. Christ sets us free from this system and in Christ we are empowered by the

Spirit to live way beyond the letter of the law. Living in freedom means we live joyfully in participation with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what our jumping-for-joy picture represents.

Today I simply want to talk about the concepts of Law and freedom. But first a little context: Paul is writing to Gentile believers in the province of Galatia in Asia Minor.

There has been a serious debate as to whether Paul is writing to ethnic, northern Galatia, referring to a people group that migrated from Gaul, or political, southern Galatia.

I am not going to delve into this, other than to say that the southern Galatia theory makes more sense, since this is where the main travel route was located. Paul planted churches on this route on his first missionary journey in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. We studied this material recently in Acts 13 and 14.

After Paul planted these churches, Jewish teachers arrived and began to teach that these new believers in Christ needed to adhere to Torah observance, specifically to circumcision, holy days, and food laws. These were the Jewish identity-markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Basically, these teachers were saying that these new believers needed to become Jewish to be part of the true people of God. The cross by itself was insufficient, according to them. Brian touched on this problem in Acts 15 last week, the idea that one need to be circumcised to be saved.

Paul gets wind of this and writes an abrupt letter in response to this teaching. He does not offer his customary thankfulness for the faith of these believers but simply begins:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. (Gal 1:6–7)

Paul labels these Jewish teachers as agitators and troublemakers. He states plainly that what they are teaching is a distortion, an alteration of the gospel.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:8–9)

Paul says that anyone who teaches a different gospel, whether it is Paul or an angel or anyone else, is accursed. The Greek word is "*anathema*," a reference to the OT idea of *herem*, meaning devoted to destruction. Notice Paul says this twice for emphasis—the gospel we preached, the gospel you received.

Later Paul says:

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ... You are severed from Christ,

you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal 5:2, 4)

And finally, Paul gets quite rude: “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” (Gal 5:12). I think you can understand what Paul is saying without me spelling it out.

Clearly Paul is beyond upset. The issue at stake for Paul is the purity of the gospel and how the Law relates to the gospel. The issue is what qualifies a person to be a member of God’s people, how we gain a right standing before God, i.e. justification. The issue is our primary identity before God and how we now live as Christians, how we grow in holiness, i.e. sanctification. This is what we will sort out over the summer.

Living Under the Law

Let’s talk a bit about the law. When Paul uses the word “law” he is referring to the OT law, the Torah. These are the 613 commands that God originally gave to his people Israel. Paul says in Romans that the law is holy, righteous, and good. The law was a wonderful gift. It revealed God’s character and gave guidelines for an ordered life to his people. However, the law could not give life because of our inability to keep the law. It was a temporary measure until Christ.

Some believe that all Torah law has ended while some claim that the moral aspects of the law still apply. But no matter how you stand on the applicability of Torah, what is clear in the New Testament is that Christ didn’t come to abolish the law but rather to fulfill it. There is not one thing that needs to be added to the cross for you to be saved and become a full-fledged member of God’s family, totally and completely accepted before God. And once we come to Christ, we are empowered by the Spirit, not the Law, to grow into maturity.

Now the Jewish/Gentile issue of the early church isn’t a big issue for most of us. We are not too worried about circumcision or dietary laws, although some would have problems with sharing a meal with certain types of people. But living under law is still a major issue for Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, Baptist or Evangelical.

At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes had added many more laws to the Torah. They used these laws to define who is in and who is out, who is clean and unclean. As the Christian church evolved over the centuries the same thing began to happen. Every denomination or religious group tends to have their own set of “extra” rules and laws.

Many of these laws are directed at what you can’t do—you can’t smoke, drink, go to movies, play cards, dance, or date girls that do those things. You need to have the right Bible translation. You should lead so many people to Christ each year. You must attend every Bible study or church service. Some of these laws are verbalized, some are just picked up through subtle messages. But if someone breaks the rules they are looked down upon.

Laws and rules and boundaries are not bad things. The world could not exist without laws. Households would not function without rules. Discipline in the Christian life is not a bad thing. Reading Scripture, going to church, and praying are good. There are healthy and unhealthy things to engage in, and rules to help you choose. The problem comes when the law is an end to itself, when the Christian life is reduced to externals only and does not involve complete union with Christ, when law defines and identifies the people of God, when law governs our lives rather than the Spirit. And all of us are susceptible to living under the law.

Why is this true? The basic dynamic of living under law is to gain our identity, approval, worth, value, and sense of belonging by performance. The dynamic is expecting approval by meeting the letter of the law, expecting life from external behavior. Accepting comes from doing. The dynamic is one of control—what controls us and how we control others. And these dynamics can be found in all our relationships—God, self, church community, family, friends, work relationships.

In our relationship with God we know intellectually that Christ did it all and that we are fully accepted, but we don’t live that way. We still perform. We keep rules through our own effort, thinking that if we do it right, then God will approve of us or love us more. If we keep all the rules then we will be able to shed shame and guilt. How many of you are working hard for God’s approval and love?

One writer shares:

For most of my Christian life I related to God on the basis of what I did for him. If I prayed well, studied hard, served much, and sinned little, then I felt reasonably sure God was pleased with me. I was living in a kind of fear that was paralyzing my ability to love God, love myself, and ultimately, love others. I was afraid that God would look at my faults and withdraw his love.¹

We can see the same dynamic at work in our church community. We think that if we make a good showing then people will accept us and love us, we will belong. How many of you have struggled with a sense of belonging in a church community? Often the place where we should feel most accepted is exactly the opposite.

The church is also a breeding ground for high-control leaders. Freedom is scary, and so church leaders try to control people so that sin does not run amuck. What will happen if you trust the Spirit and give the congregation freedom?

We find the dynamics of living under law in family relationships. We think if we do well then parents will love and approve of us. Some people are trying to earn their parent’s love into their 50’s and 60’s. Children often learn to perform through grades, sports, and good behavior to gain the acceptance and love they desire. This might be very relevant for the young people here this morning, learning the difference between behavior and identity. While rules and boundaries are good for young people, the goal is to grow into an adult relationship where there is freedom.

How about self? We can be hard on ourselves. I know that is true for me. I’m a card-carrying member of the legalist society. I want to keep the rules. The voice I hear is not, “your sin is not that bad.” The voice I hear is, “I should be better. I should have done it better. I should have known better.” It is easy for me to envision God as disappointed, angry, indifferent, saying, “John, get your act together.” I bet a couple of you might identify.

This same dynamic, performing to gain life and acceptance, can apply to friends and co-workers as well. In fact, living under law can affect every area of our life. But living this way is tragic because it can have devastating effects in our life. Let me mention a few things that we will keep repeating this summer.

Firstly, living under law prevents us from being God’s beloved, his cherished sons or daughters. We don’t have to earn God’s approval. The gospel reveals that God is a relational God, not a tyrant or taskmaster. He says, “Come as you are. All are welcomed.” This is what the incarnation teaches us.

Second, living under law inhibits vulnerability and openness. We come to church but we are pretending to be something we are not, faking it. We fear that if people really knew us they would not accept us. Being closed to others inhibits growth in Christ and genuine transformation.

Third, living under law breeds judgmental attitudes. We live by the rules and judge everyone who doesn't keep them. We compare and compete to gain superiority, to increase our sense of value. The attitude is, "we have it right and they don't."

Fourth, living under law stifles joy and life. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). He calls the law the ministry of death and the ministry of condemnation. He says that even though the law came with incredible glory, it has no glory compared to the new covenant in Christ.

Finally, living under the law fosters control dynamics. We become consumed with external behavior and appearance and thus give power for others to control us or exert control over others. This was the case in Galatia:

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. (Gal 6:13).

Sometimes pastors want a thriving congregation or parents want their children to succeed solely for their own benefit and thus become controlling people.

Living with Freedom

Let's talk about freedom. Performance may be how the world operates, but that is not how God operates. To think differently distorts the gospel and is a lie about God, which is why Paul is so upset.

Jesus invites us into freedom: "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:32-36).

Freedom is not easy to define. It doesn't mean that we can do anything we want to do. Freedom is an internal reality whereby we are no longer a slave to sin and we are also no longer bound by laws and rules to give us identity and define the Christian life. Christ sets us free from the nagging voice that says, "you are not good enough. I should have. I need to do more." If we are free then a difficult family, a troublesome job, or physical confinement will not control our life and joy. Christ takes us to a new dimension of life. We are a new creation indwelt with the Spirit. Paul writes:

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20)

"For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." (Gal 6:15)

There are many commands and exhortations in the NT. But freedom means we do not engage with those commands in an "old creation" manner. We hear them as a new creation in Christ. We engage the Spirit rather than the flesh. We don't count laps but flow with the Spirit to swim beyond what counting can do. We travel light. We are free to be who we were created to be from the beginning. One of our core values at PBC is grace-filled life in the Spirit, and this is a major theme in Galatians as we will continue to see this summer. It is the Spirit that allows us to live in freedom: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Cor. 3:17)

I know what you are thinking; we can't throw out the law. But Jesus made it clear that the whole law is summed up in two commands: love God and love your neighbor. Love is the goal and this does not happen by law but through Spirit. This is what Paul says later in the letter.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Gal 5:6)

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal 5:14)

Freedom means we are free to love God and others, free to die to self and live for Christ, free to be authentic and honest, free to work for justice in the world. Freedom means we can live out the true meaning of the law from the heart because the Spirit writes the law on our heart. We are free to live what James calls the "perfect law, the law of liberty" (James 1:25).

Our hope for this summer is to journey together from law to freedom, from law to grace, from law to Spirit. And it is always great to hear stories that will encourage our journey. So, Esther Paaske is going to come and share with you her story of freedom:

Esther's Story of Freedom in Christ

I'm here this morning to share about my journey to freedom in Christ, which started from a most unexpected source. Some of you know my cancer story. Yet, it is only recently that I have gained a new perspective into my journey through cancer.

It began on Halloween day of 2001. I still remember that moment, which is etched forever in my memory, when the word "cancer" invaded our lives. Time came to a standstill while I tried to make sense of what lay before me. Here I was, holding a serenely sleeping newborn in my arms in the doctor's office, a toddler son waiting for me back at home, and I was just handed what seemed like a death sentence!

As life turned upside down in the coming weeks, on top of the fear and anxiety of the unknown future, the question of "why?" weighed heavily on my spirit. I had given my life to God in college, and since then had tried to live my life for God, seeking His will, being a "good Christian." But the way I saw the world was through a system of equations. Good behavior led to rewards, or "blessings," and bad behavior led to discipline. I knew I was saved, but I thought I had to keep God "happy" by my obedience. I would constantly analyze my circumstances to course-correct—like the time I was rear-ended; my immediate thought was, "this is happening because I didn't have my quiet time this morning."

So, faced with cancer, my gut reaction was to ask what had I done to displease God? What was he disciplining me for? And if I had somehow offended him, even unknowingly, what could I do to get back into His good graces? Even more importantly, what must I do in the future so this doesn't happen again?

As my life blurred on through a year of intense treatment, I was battling for my life on all fronts. When I look back now, the physical pain I had to endure pales in comparison with the fear and anxiety I felt of leaving my young children motherless. Yet these emotions pale still further in comparison to the spiritual pain I felt in wondering why God, who seemed distant and stern, was doing this to me.

I never doubted that God was God; I had no one else to cling to. As Job says, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15).

I knew that God understood my mother's heart. My lifeline verse was,

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Is 49:15-16).

I knew that God strengthens us through trials to make us more like Christ, and that "all things work together for good" (Rom 8:28).

But, even as I clung to these promises, I found it impossible to see God as my loving Father. I found myself wondering if God's definition of "good" would indeed be good, like the way I was told as a child to eat liver because it was "good for you." I wanted so badly to be able to rest in God's love for me, yet it seemed far out of reach; instead, I saw Him as someone whom I must please so that I would have his blessing. And even when I saw blessings along the way, my thankfulness and joy were tentative and restrained, for who knew if I might displease God again and have these taken away? I always felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and this sense of insecurity added to my fears and anxieties through the roller coaster of life with cancer.

The turning point came in a sermon one Sunday in 2002. John taught on a passage in Jeremiah 30, where the judgment of the idolatrous nation of Judah was described using the same words as the suffering of the prophet Jeremiah himself in chapter 15, and we saw what God was doing through the times of pain in both cases. The point was not why, but how God, out of his infinite love and unchanging purpose for them, was drawing them closer to him through the times of pain. Regardless of the reason, whether it was from judgment or from suffering, the purpose was the same, and that is what mattered.

I still remember where I was sitting that morning as I listened to these words. It was as if the proverbial light bulb turned on! I felt freed from the need to figure out the "whys" as I turned my focus from the past to the future to see what God was doing in me. That was the first step in my journey to freedom in Christ, even though I didn't know it at the time.

As I got involved with Women's Bible Study and studied the stories of men and women in the Bible, the biggest take-away I had each year was that God is sovereign. Here were all these people full of flaws who often stumbled along in life, sometimes even willfully rebelling against God, yet God was always faithful to them, and His plan continued forward despite the messes they made. Even more amazingly, He would redeem those times and use those very messes to accomplish His purpose! What an awesome God!

Gradually, the filter through which I saw my circumstances changed from my old legalistic ways to focus on the sovereign grace of God, who is faithful to us even when we are not faithful to Him, and who loves us unconditionally because of what Christ has done, not because of what I can do. As I was freed from the need to please God through performance, I was able not only to see the love my Heavenly Father had for me, but to accept it—there was nothing I could do to make Him love me more, and there was nothing I could do to make Him love me less! I could approach Him with all my problems, even ones of my own making, and, yes, there would be

consequences sometimes, but our God is a God of redemption and restoration!

I can't tell you how grateful I am for this freedom in Christ, because now I can see the bondage which I had been under in my old legalistic ways. I am no longer fueled by fear, and the distorted thinking that I could ever earn God's blessings by doing everything right. Instead, I am learning to embrace my new identity in Christ, and the new calling to be part of His "treasured possession," "a royal priesthood and a holy nation," as Peter writes, "that we may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) And he has done exactly that—not just in saving me from my sins but also in delivering me from the bondage of legalism.

The years after my treatment have still been full of ups and downs. The latest trial with my health was years in the making, and I finally needed surgery to remove scar tissues that formed from my cancer treatment. The recovery was anything but easy and simple; I ended up spending five weeks in the hospital, only to be discharged to recover at home because there was nothing more they could do for me there. I have to admit that there were times I still asked, "why?" Yet, now it was with no sense of guilt or insecurity; I went to my Abba Father with my pain and frustration, and He taught me contentment, that his grace was sufficient for me, for his power was made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

I sometimes wonder what my life would be like had I not gone through cancer and its aftermath. It's not something I would wish upon anyone. But my journey through cancer has led me to an incredible blessing: a true freedom in Christ and a father-daughter relationship with a God who is bigger than my circumstances, one whose purpose for me extends to a higher calling.

I cannot explain it better than C.S. Lewis when he described an encounter Lucy had with Aslan the Lion in *Prince Caspian*:

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."²

That is my prayer for all of us, that as we grow in faith to embrace our freedom in Christ, we will see a bigger and bigger God who has given us freedom through a new identity for a new purpose.

1. James Brian Smith, *Embracing the Love of God*, (HarperCollins 1995), 18.

2. C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, (HarperCollins 1979), 148