



THE KEY TO FREEDOM: BEING THE BELOVED

SERIES: GALATIANS: JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM

Galatians 4:1-7

5th Message

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The words we just sang, “I am your beloved,” are what we want to talk about today. Being the beloved is the key to freedom, the key to a life that is not controlled by rules and regulations, what I should do or what I should be. A popular song when I was growing up begins, “I fought the law and the law won.”¹ This is what Paul is trying to say in the book of Galatians. Living under law is a losing proposition. Living under law is contrary to the gospel and grace.

Our summer study has been focusing on living free as opposed to living under law. As we have discussed, in the Galatian churches, some Jewish agitators were telling Gentile Christians that Jesus was not enough. Rather, they needed to keep Torah, to maintain the Jewish identity markers, to basically become Jews in order to be the people of God. Paul has been laying out the theological groundwork for why this thinking is false.

A right relationship with God does not come from works of the law. Why not? If we live under law, we are under obligation to keep the whole law. But because we are unable to do that, we fall under the curse of the law. Living under law is a system of failure. Life can never come from law, whether it is the Torah of the Old Testament (OT) or religious rules and duties in the church. Rather than leading us into a holy life, law keeps us imprisoned in sin and preoccupied with what we do wrong.

A right relationship with God comes through Christ. The law was only a temporary measure until Christ came. The law was a guardian, a servant to lead us to Christ. After Christ came the servant was no longer needed. Life comes as a result of a promise God made before the law came. The promise was made to Abraham, the promise of a seed that would bless all the nations. Jesus fulfilled this promise. And now we become participants, as Gentiles, in this promise by faith in the faithfulness of Christ. The Spirit now replaces the law and empowers us to live a holy life. We can love God and love others, not out of duty but as a result of a changed heart. We are #free2live.

Last week our study concluded with the end of chapter 3. In the last few verses Paul outlines what it means for us to be in Christ as the people of God.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:25-29 ESV)

The season for law is over because we have been baptized or placed into Christ. We have put on Christ; we are clothed with Christ. We are not separate from Christ or partly in Christ. Rather our whole being is in Christ. And this changes everything.

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of baptizing my 10 year old grandson. He was here from Colorado and he wanted grandpa to

baptize him in the ocean. I was overwhelmed with by his request. So we sat on the beach and talked about Jesus. We talked about what it means to be in Christ and how baptism symbolizes our union in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We talked about following Jesus and how meaningful this moment was. Noah shared about his desire to be baptized and follow Christ. What we didn't talk about was any rules or regulations. We didn't talk about the law.

Paul gives three results of being in Christ for the believer. First we are all sons and daughters of God because we are in the Son. This is our primary relationship. This is what we will talk more about in a minute.

Second, we are one in Christ. There is no distinction between people based on heritage, ethnicity, gender, or status. Law divides and separates people. Law creates barriers and walls. Christ brings all together in one body, Jew and Gentile alike.

Third, we are heirs according to promise. Since we are in Christ, we are spiritual children of Abraham. This means that being a member of the people of God is not based on being a physical Jew. In Christ, Jew and Gentile alike become the spiritual seeds of Abraham, equal heirs of the promise. And this is what upset the Jews in Paul's day.

When you think about it, this is really amazing stuff. What God promised Abraham is ours. This is why the gospel is such great news. But as we have talked about, breaking out of a law-based system of relating to God and to others is very difficult. Maybe it is easy for you, but I find it isn't easy for me. Maybe you have the free life all figured out, but most people struggle.

Law can come in the form of external religious rules; the harsh demands of a parent; moral or behavior standards imposed by self or others; or academic or career expectations. Law appeals to self-effort and performance to seek validation, acceptance, approval, or love. Law is the voice that tells us that we should do better or be better. Law is the voice of condemnation and judgment. Law exerts control over our lives, creating fear and robbing us of freedom.

I once asked a group of people, “who has the most control over your life?” One older woman said, “my parents who are long past dead.” In other words, she still heard a judging and condemning voice. What we really desire is to live in freedom under the control of the Spirit, not the law. We might understand Paul's logic in our minds, but what will help make this a reality in our own lives? This is what Paul goes onto explain.

Children, Slaves, and Sons

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born

under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:1-7)

Paul gives us three relationships to consider: child, slave, and son.

First, a child. A child here likely refers to a minor who has not reached the age of maturity. He still needs protection, guidance, and care. Paul uses this word in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians to emphasize vulnerability and need for growth. A child is under the care of guardians and managers, household servants, until he reaches the time set by the father to become an adult son.

Even though a child is an heir and owner of everything by right, he has no experience of this reality while remaining a child. Thus he is no different than a slave who has no hope for a future inheritance. The child is analogous to a person living under law. The law keeps him from an adult relationship with the father and the experience of being an heir. In particular the pronoun *we* might imply that a Jew living under law is no different than a Gentile, even though he is a descendant of Abraham and has all the promises of the covenant.

Paul also states the child is under the elemental principles of the cosmos, the *stoixeia*. The *stoixeia* are the fundamental elements of the world, in particular earth, air, water, and fire. These elements were thought to have some transcendent power, and might have been the object of pagan worship. Remarkably, Paul is saying that living under law is not much different than living as a pagan under the elemental principles.

Most of us know what it is like to return home after being an adult and living on our own. You go back to your parents home, and what happens? You slip back into relating as a child. That is what it is like when you return to living under law after being clothed with Christ. You revert back to childhood.

The second relationship is as a slave. A slave in Paul's time had no rights, no legal standing. The master had power over the slave. The slave had to obey the master's orders. A slave did not have freedom to choose what he wanted to do. Some slaves were treated very harshly.

Living under law is also analogous to being a slave. In particular, the Gentiles were like slaves. Paul uses the pronoun *you*. In verse 8, Paul says the Galatians were “slaves to those which by nature are no gods.” And in verse 9 Paul talks about returning to be slaves of the *stoixeia*, the elemental principles. These Gentiles in Galatia had come to Christ, but if they put themselves under law it would be just like returning to pagan slavery.

Notice that Paul uses Torah and *stoixeia*, the elemental principles, interchangeably. It makes no difference whether one is a child under law or a slave under *stoixeia*. Both the Christian and the non-Christian can be controlled by the same dynamics. Neither the slave nor the child experiences freedom. Neither the slave nor child experiences the type of relationship that God wants him or her to experience.

There is a third relationship, the relationship that God does desire, the relationship of freedom. This relationship is not a child or a slave, but an adult son/daughter. It is not a legal relationship, it is a family relationship. It is not a fearful relationship, it is an affectionate relationship, a relationship of intimacy. This relationship happens because God sent forth his Son who was born of woman, (i.e. a

human, the promised seed, born under the law; a Jew), so that he could redeem us from the law and in particular the curse of the law.

Paul uses the word son, and he uses the word for “adoption as sons,” or sonship. In the Roman world, son-placing was a ceremony by which a child would receive a change in status from child to adult. It was a marvelous day. A child would become a man and would receive a new toga, new robe that would signify his new status. This ceremony was used by Roman emperors who adopted men other than blood relatives to succeed them in authority. After this ceremony the new son was equal to any child born in the home.

Paul says that this is the relationship we now have as a result of being in Christ. God sent forth His Son so that we might be a son, a daughter. God sent forth the Spirit of His Son so that we could experience an intimate relationship with God and call Him “Abba, Father.” This way of addressing God was unknown to the Jews. God's people in the (OT) approached God with fear. They could not go into the Holy Place in the temple. But Jesus changed that and addressed the father as “Abba.” And as sons and daughters, we can as well.

“The gift of sonship confers the privilege of the child to address the father with intimacy.”² You might note all three persons of the trinity are in our text.

This is what the story of the prodigal son illustrates in such a powerful way. The story describes a father and his extravagant love for two lost sons. One was lost in the house, one was lost outside the house. The older son stayed home, kept all the rules, but was like the child. He had never experienced sonship, even though he was heir to everything.

The younger son, on the other hand, left home, squandered his inheritance, and lived like a slave. Remember the plan that the younger son devised: he would ask his father to take him back as a slave. But when the father saw the prodigal, he made him a son, an adult son, and he gave him his finest robe, which conferred upon him the identity of sonship.

But the story doesn't end there, for we see that the father had the same desire for the son who had always been with him. Even though the older son was angry and resentful, the father goes to him and shows the same extravagant love as he had for the prodigal. God is like this father, who wants us to be sons and daughters whether we are Jews or Greeks, whether we grew up in church or lived a life of sin in the world. We are all equal in his eyes. God does not have grandchildren, only sons and daughters.

A Journey of Becoming a Son

These verses had a dramatic impact on my life. I have shared part of my story before, but maybe it will help illustrate what Paul is talking about. It was the summer of 1992 and my life was out of control. I was 42 years old. My teenage daughter, my oldest daughter, was rebelling. My mother was dying from cancer. My father had died four years previously. I was taking a class on Galatians at Regent College. When we hit these verses that talked about being a son I said to myself, “I am not a son; that is not me. I have no idea what that would be like.” Of course I knew it intellectually because I had studied the Bible, but I had no experience of sonship. All I knew was child and slave.

I didn't have a bad home. My parents loved me. But I didn't have a close or affectionate relationship with my parents. My mother

was about the rules and my dad was pretty quiet. As a result I didn't receive the affirmation and love I desired. And so I turned to the performance story, seeking approval and significance through performance, validating my life with grades and sports. I went to church every Sunday and even preached an Easter sunrise service in high school. There were moments when I experienced God when I was young but gradually God became distant and impersonal. I was the good child.

When I went to college my heart towards God grew cold and I became a slave to sin, looking for love in all the wrong places. All through college I was searching. I was actually searching for God, I just didn't know it. During my senior year I started reading the gospels, and my searching lead me to Jesus; or, more accurately, Jesus found me in the darkness. I know what it is like to be the older son and the prodigal.

At first I experienced incredible freedom and joy with the Lord. My life started to change dramatically. I started growing in Christ and serving in ministry. But eventually I went back to the performance story, working hard to meet the expectations that I imagined God had placed on me, trying to keep all the rules, avoiding sin, being successful in ministry. I began relating to my spiritual family the same way I related to my physical family.

As I continued thinking about these verses in Galatians, I realized that law had defined my life. It defined the way I related to the world and people, to my parents, my wife, and my children. I wanted my children to be successful and so I became more law than grace. And then it dawned on me that law defined my relationship with God. How you relate to people tells you how you relate to God.

What I wanted was to be a son. I wanted to experience the kind of love the prodigal experienced when he came home. I wanted home. I knew that no one could satisfy this desire other than God, not parents who were both gone, not my spouse, children, or ministry. I knew that I had to get this right or nothing else mattered. So I just prayed for my desire.

One day I was sitting quietly and heard a voice saying, "You are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased." It was the voice of God. I don't hear voices very much, but those were the sweetest words I have ever heard. A wonderful feeling swept into my heart. I began to experience a deep love from God and a new freedom that changed the way I related to God and to people. Sonship love from God is the key to interior freedom that allows us to give freedom to others. I don't always feel this love. I have to return to that place again and again because it is so easy for me to return to the performance story. But that moment changed my life dramatically. I was home.

Anthony de Mello writes, "The great turning point in your life comes not when you realize that you love God but when you realize and fully accept the fact that God loves you unconditionally."³

How would you describe your relationship with God as you sit here this morning—as a child, slave, or daughter or son? Imagine God thinking about you right now, looking at your face. What's he thinking about you? What's he feeling towards you?

God wants each of us to come to come to him and feel his arms on our shoulders in the way that Rembrandt represents in his painting of the prodigal son. Each of us has to come into the center. We can't stay on the outside just watching as others receive sonship love. And sometimes it is the pain of life that opens up our hearts wide enough so that we can receive what he wants to give us.

God sent his beloved Son so we, too, could be his beloved sons or daughters. And God sent his Spirit so we can call God "Abba." This is our primary relationship. Being the beloved is the relationship where we gain the love, approval, and acceptance our heart longs for. Living under law doesn't give us this relationship. In fact, it keeps us from being the beloved. Doing good things and avoiding bad things doesn't give us this relationship. No matter what you do or don't do, it won't change the way God feels about you. This is hard to believe but it is true.

The journey into being the beloved isn't easy. I can't give you a formula. The journey is personal for each of us. We all have different backgrounds and issues we deal with. You might be a legalist like me. Or you may have had, or do have, really difficult relationships with your parents. Some of you may have a hard time imagining a loving father. Some of you may have had bad experiences with spiritual leaders whom you thought you could trust. Sometimes it takes a long time for truth to travel the 18 inches from your head to your heart. But don't settle for anything less than being the beloved. Home is in the center of your heart when you hear God say, "you are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased."

1. The Crickets. "I Fought the Law." Rec. 1959. *In Style with the Crickets*. 1959. Composed by Sonny Curtis

2. Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, (Colorado Springs Helmers & Howard 1988), 117

3. Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus: The Stranger to Self-Hatred* (New York, HarperCollins 2003), 94

