



WHY IS FREEDOM SO HARD?

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Second Message
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There are some things in life that we want very much. At times these appear almost in our grasp, yet when we reach for them we find they are as far away as ever. In our opening study in the book of Galatians we talked about freedom. We defined freedom as “being rescued from this present evil age; separated from the world.” Many of you were saying to yourselves, “I want to be free. I hunger for the kind of freedom that the apostle Paul is talking about.”

But freedom is difficult to attain. And, even when we have achieved it, it is difficult to maintain. Writing about Christian freedom, Eugene Peterson says, “If freedom were natural, it would be inevitable. But it is not inevitable. Not all lives are free. Many persons do not experience freedom at all as they go from childhood to adulthood; they only exchange determinisms. Dependency on parents is exchanged for dependency on a spouse. Addiction to the breast is exchanged for addiction to alcohol or drugs. The fear of parental authority is exchanged for the fear of peer disapproval. Anxiety over losing the securities of the familiar is exchanged for anxieties that provoke paralysis in face of any change or danger. Spontaneities never occur. Motives never develop. Dreams are never accepted; challenges, never met” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Halmers & Howard, 1988] 21-22).

Why is freedom so hard to achieve? And why are people so susceptible to living under the law? These are the questions we want to discuss this morning as we complete our study in the introduction to the apostle’s letter. Verses 6 through 10 of chapter 1.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. (Gal 1:6-10, NASB)

Paul’s letters usually begin with a word of praise or

thanksgiving for the faith of the believers to whom he is writing, but in this case the apostle cuts straight to the purpose behind his letter. The problem was that the Galatian churches, according to the apostle, were “deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another.” “Deserting” here means to “turn away, change one’s mind, turn apostate, transfer one’s allegiance.” The Galatians had become spiritual deserters. They had turned away from God, the One who had reached out and called them in the grace of Christ, for a different gospel. Paul hastens to add that this was not really the gospel. There is only one gospel; any distortion of it made it no longer the gospel.

The reason behind the Galatians’ deserting the God who had called them was that they had been infiltrated by “troublemakers and agitators.” The word for “disturb” in verse 7 means to “stir up, shake, unsettle, throw into confusion.” Later, in chapter 5, Paul will use another word to describe this, a word which means “to trouble and upset.” The identity of these infiltrators is uncertain. Clearly they were Jews, perhaps from Jerusalem. They were outsiders, because Paul refers to them in the third person plural, while he addresses the Galatians in the second person. Whatever their identity, these agitators had stirred things up because they had altered the true gospel. They were convincing the Galatian believers to place themselves under the laws of the Torah, specifically circumcision (5:2-3; 6:12-13), the religious calendar (4:10, from Chronicles), and the Jewish food laws (2:11-13). They were persuading the Galatian Christians that having Christ alone was not enough; now that they were saved they had to place themselves under the law. The issue was not entrance requirements to the Christian faith, but maintenance requirements for their faith. Moses, they held, must finish what Christ had begun. This was the issue that lay at the heart of the legalism that Paul is confronting.

Why were these new believers persuaded to change their understanding of the gospel? Why would a group of Gentiles, not native to this region, be vulnerable to the teaching of these troublemakers, especially when Paul himself had laid a solid foundation for their faith? An analogous situation would be for believers who had sat for years under Ray Stedman’s teaching here at PBC to be swayed by some other teaching upon his departure. The answer seems to be that in the first century, people were either Jews or pagans; there were no other

options. The Christian cult was held in disdain, but Jews had special privileges. They had political standing, and were not subject to persecution for their faith, as the Christians were. When a Gentile came to Christ, forsaking his background, he lost his identity. But then along came these agitators with their identity markers, offering status and security. The Galatians were sitting ducks for the proponents of legalism.

This is why legalism seems so attractive and why, paradoxically, freedom seems suspect. People crave security, identity, approval, and a sense of value. Persecution is not popular in any culture. People lack the confidence and courage to stand on their own. Last week I had a discussion with a boy on our baseball team on why people swear. Why do kids swear? I asked him. He replied, "They want to be cool." Kids know that swearing is not right, that it demonstrates lack of maturity, but it's hard to not go along with what everyone else is doing.

The same dynamic is at work in people who live under the law. Just as the Galatians wanted approval from the Jewish teachers, we tend to base our behavior on the approval of others. We try to please God through keeping Torah, or we try to please others through following whatever law they impose upon us. We usually relate to God and people in the same way. If we are under law in our relationship with God, then we are under law in our relationships with others; if we are under law with others, then we are under law with God. We think approval from God comes from keeping law and avoiding wrongdoing. We feel guilt and shame when we fail, because others, usually a parent or spouse, heap guilt and disapproval upon us. Our sense of well-being depends on the response of others. We crave approval and praise; we dread disapproval and failure. We are addictive, easily controlled people.

Legalism in the church manifests itself in many different ways. For example, a new Christian welcomed into the fold soon discovers there is an unwritten code of rules, things like length of hair, dress styles, unacceptable movies and music, how many people should be led to Christ each year, etc. Gradually, one's relationship with God becomes defined by external performance. We hunger for the approval of people rather than the approval of God, so we do what everyone else is doing in order to be accepted. We want to become part of some inner group and we begin to serve so that others will notice. Forty years ago, "real" Christians carried a Scofield Reference Bible. Twenty years ago, a leather-covered New American Standard Bible was a must — and you were really spiritual if you carried a Greek New Testament!

The church, the very place where people should find freedom and joy, sadly, is where we oftentimes find rampant legalism and control operating. Oftentimes the church is the very place where strong people, acting out

of their sense of self-importance, seek to control others in the name of God. The church attracts a lot of hurting, needy people who are looking for acceptance and identity. They will do anything to gain approval, and therefore they become easy prey for leaders who gain *their* sense of identity by controlling others.

One reason behind this kind of behavior in leaders is their mistaken notion that Christian freedom needs to be monitored lest sinfulness and chaos break out among the flock. They find freedom a scary notion. They actually think they are modeling godliness. When they are challenged, they respond by saying something like, "We are helping to define holiness and purity for the flock. They need to see how these things look." Of course, it's much easier to appear godly than to actually be godly. That is why they offer a list of do's and don'ts that can be easily checked. But the results of this kind of legalism are devastating. Hearts dry up, worship dies, anger and resentment builds, faith becomes insincere. When people are motivated by guilt, all the joy that is theirs in Christ soon disappears.

But living under the law is not exclusive to churchgoers. Later in this book, Paul says that the same dynamics are at work among Christians living under Torah or among pagans living under the rudimentary principles of the world. Thus we should expect to find legalism operating in most of our relationships. Children so desire the approval and acceptance of their parents, they will do anything to gain it. In school, they will try to get all A's, take a subject they don't want to study, or play a sport they hate. Husbands and wives want the approval and acceptance of their spouses so they will do anything to gain it, even to the extent of looking the other way if their mates are abusive or alcoholic. We won't tell the truth because we don't want to risk conflict. We seek praise not for who we are, but for what we do. And if we don't get it, we work harder at it.

On the other extreme, we can be so paranoid about granting people freedom that we seek to control every aspect of their lives. This is how we act with our children. We are more concerned about their behavior than we are about their maturity level and character. We wonder what people will think of them if they don't act like perfect Christians, so we impose one rule after another on them. We want to protect them from the bad things we did when we were young, so we deny them the grace that God demonstrates toward us. We keep correcting them, telling them they should be doing better.

I began to share with you last week how in this book I found the story of my life. The phrase "under the law" described how I lived most of my life. I grew up in a loving home. Everything my parents did for me was meant for good, yet I needed their approval and praise. I sought the same things from my brothers. When I got

married, my wife's parents rejected me, so I placed myself under the law and sought to win their approval. I resolved to be the perfect father to my children. Even when I did physical exercise I did it in a legalistic way. If I didn't run a certain number of miles, I didn't feel good about myself.

When I became a pastor in this church ten years ago, I was not introduced to the congregation as a pastor, so I began to sense that I was not accepted. I responded by placing myself under the law. In order to gain acceptance, I worked harder and longer than was necessary. At one point I was in a deep depression for about three months, but because I was under the law I could not share that with anyone. In everything I did I simply wanted approval. Then I began to see that this was how I was relating to God in my walk of faith. Although I had been a Christian for many years, and I knew that God loved me, I didn't think he approved of me. It can take a long time for basic truth to travel the 18 inches from the head to the heart.

The way we act at home is the way we will act in church. The way we relate to God is how we will relate to others. If we are seeking to gain approval, identity, or worth in any relationship, whether it is with God or with other Christians, family, friends, or colleagues at work, then we are putting ourselves under the law. This is why freedom is so hard to attain and maintain.

Notice that Paul reacts with surprise and amazement at the situation in Galatia. He writes, "I marvel that you so quickly are deserting Him who called you." Then he issues a somber warning, not once, but twice: "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed." This warning is universal in scope: "we, or an angel from heaven" — anyone, in other words. Paul even applies this admonition to himself. The action that provokes such a severe warning is preaching a gospel contrary to the one preached and received. Any alteration or distortion of that truth, no matter how minor, is a serious offense. And the judgment, pronounced on anyone who distorts the gospel, is: "let him be accursed." This word, "anathema," speaks of absolute rejection. In the O.T., it refers to the divine ban, the curse of God resting upon anything or anyone devoted by him to destruction. In Joshua 6, God applied this ban to the spoils of Jericho, which were devoted to divine destruction. It was this very stricture that Achan violated, and he paid for his sin with his life.

The reason Paul can make such a profound statement is that he has a clear sense of his priorities: he is a servant of God, not a man pleaser. He would not be making such a severe statement if he were out to win man's favor; rather, he would put himself under law to win their approval. But he has been called by God, and he takes his calling seriously.

Why did Paul react so strongly to this issue? What's wrong with circumcision, anyway? The apostle is looking way beyond mere circumcision. He knows that the very gospel is at stake, that circumcision is just the beginning, the opening round in the battle for the gospel. If the Galatians submitted themselves to this external sign, soon they would be placing themselves under other tenets of the law and they would never again experience the freedom that was theirs in Christ. Vince Lombardi, one the greatest coaches of this century, once yelled angrily at one of his players, "If you cheat in a practice session, you will cheat in a game. And if you cheat in a game, you will cheat for the rest of your life, and I will not have it" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 34-35). Paul would not have it, either.

Eugene Peterson calls this practice by the Galatian agitators, "telling lies about God." He writes, "It is wicked to tell a person a lie about God because, if we come to believe the wrong things about God, we will think the wrong things about ourselves, and we will live meanly or badly. Telling a person a lie about God distorts reality, perverts life and damages all the processes of living" (*Traveling Light*, 35). And the lie is this: that who you are depends on what you do; that your identity, worth, and importance depend on your ability to perform. This is the way the world functions. But to say that it is the same with God is a lie. And if we believe this lie, we are living under the law.

Our identity is who we are; our behavior is what we do. Christians get into trouble and begin living under the law by confusing these two things, identity and behavior. If we confuse these two, our identity will always be at stake and we will base it on keeping Torah, being "good," teaching the Bible, getting a promotion, seeking approval. This is what drives the world. But it is not so with God. The truth of the gospel is that God is crazy about you. There is nothing you can do that will change what he thinks about you. Everything has been done in Christ. In terms of our behavior, there may be issues that he will have to take care of, but our identity in Christ is never at stake. That has been settled once and for all.

This truth has become central in my relationship with God, and it has greatly helped me in my role as a father to my children. Before I learned it I was always placing them under law by confusing their identity with their behavior. I think this is why many kids today are under stress, in school, in sports, in the church. They are confused about who they are. Any mention of failure is devastating to them, because their behavior is closely tied to their identity. But now I am beginning to see my children the way God sees me. Even though there are some rules that cannot be ignored, and some behavior that is unacceptable, I love them, and that will never change.

Last year, my son was a freshman in high school and

he went out for the baseball team. For ten years he has been playing baseball and I have been involved with his teams as a coach. You could say that much of our identity was wrapped up in the great American pastime. On the day when the final cuts were made on the high school squad, he told me he didn't make the team. After a long silence, I said to him, "John, I don't care what others think. I don't care that you haven't made the team. I think you're great."

This is what God is saying to each one of us: "I think you are great." It doesn't matter whether you make the team, whether you are overweight, whether you earn a lot of money, or whether you are a teacher at church. God cares about these things but they have absolutely nothing to do with who you are and what God thinks about you. God thinks you are great! Anyone who would tell you differently is lying — Paul says that peo-

ple who lie about God are accursed. While the apostle is concerned with how we behave now that we are children of God, he wants initially to lay out the things of first importance. This is why he spends four and a half chapters of this book on Christian identity before he moves on to Christian behavior. We must first get our sense of identity right. There is no point in going on to the second stage until that is in place.

If we think that what we do relates to who we are, then we are believing a lie and we will live under the law in our relationship with God and in our other relationships. God has called you to freedom, and the beginning of freedom is believing the truth of what God says about you. You are wonderful, and that will never change. This is the gospel. Jesus said, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:32, 36).

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