



THREATS TO FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 2:1-10
Fourth Message
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Last year was our year for family visits to the doctor. We had so many emergencies, it seemed we almost needed a regular appointment with the sports medicine clinic. I had knee surgery, my oldest daughter injured her knee water skiing, then she broke her collarbone snow skiing. My son had knee surgery, and then he broke his wrist snow boarding.

Life is a risky business. If we want to take advantage of the opportunities it has to offer, there are risks involved that can limit our activity and reduce our freedom of movement. If we don't want to risk injury, however, then the best thing to do is play it safe: stay home, avoid the freeways, and live a safe, but perhaps boring life.

The Christian life too can be risky. We have been learning in the book of Galatians that Christians are free. That is very good news, but, if we are going to be active and live life freely, as God would have us live, then we must recognize that there will always be threats to our freedom. That is why freedom is a scary thing for some Christians. They find that it is much safer to avoid risk, so they live under the law and let law define their existence.

Today, as we begin the second chapter of the apostle Paul's letter, we are still in the autobiographical section of this book. Paul continues to detail the story of how the gospel was revealed to him by Christ. Last week we saw how the apostle authenticated the fact that men did not influence the gospel that he proclaimed. He received a revelation from Jesus Christ, he said, and he was independent from the church leadership in Jerusalem. Today we will learn how the apostle met a threat to his freedom during a visit he made to Jerusalem. This second chapter of Galatians actually deals with two threats to Paul's freedom. (We will look at the second threat next week.)

Paul begins by describing the nature of his visit to Jerusalem. Verses 1-2:

After an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. (Gal 2:1-2, NASB)

The timing of this visit has been the basis for much scholarly debate. Is Paul referring to his visit to the Council at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15? Is this 14-year period to be taken from the time of his conversion, or since his last visit to Jerusalem? The dynamics of Galatians 2 are quite similar to Acts 15; and the results are similar as well. The sub-title in your Bible might say that this visit by Paul took place during the time of the Council in Jerusalem, but I think not. Rather, this is the visit mentioned in Acts 11, where Agabus had a revelation of an impending famine,

and Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem with money for the relief effort. If this text in Galatians 2 is referring to Acts 15, then the Acts 11 visit is omitted from Paul's narrative here in Galatians. Also, if this visit is in fact referring to Acts 15, Paul makes no reference to the letter or the decree of the Council. Finally, if this passage is referring to Acts 15, then the book of Galatians demands a much earlier date.

In any event, Paul went up to Jerusalem, taking with him Barnabas, "the son of encouragement." Barnabas, a fellow-Jew, a senior colleague in the leadership of the church of Antioch, was Paul's right hand man. Paul also took with him Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile Christian. As we will see, Titus will become a test case as to the authenticity of Paul's gospel in light of the Judaizing arguments and opposition that the apostle will face.

The reason for Paul's visit was a "revelation." (In 1:12 we read of another "revelation," the one in which Paul received his gospel through Jesus Christ.) So the apostle went to Jerusalem as a result of a revelation; he was not summoned by the ecclesiastical authorities. (Here again, the notion of a revelation refers back to Acts 11, not Acts 15.) Paul's mission, he points out, was to submit to the leaders of the church the gospel which he was preaching to the Gentiles. His audience consisted of "those who were of reputation," i.e., the apostles and disciples of Jesus, men of influence. And he did this "in private...for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain." This was a small, private affair, not an official conference.

But Paul encounters a problem. Verses 3-5:

But not even Titus who was with me, though he was Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

The apostle is confronted by a number of antagonists — "false brethren," is the term he uses for them. These men, presumably members of the church, were Jews who wanted to retain their Jewish marks of identity. In this they resembled the agitators and troublemakers who had infiltrated the Galatian churches. These men were counterfeits, pseudo-Christians, believers in name only. They used deception to sneak in to spy on Paul's freedom. That would not be difficult. Freedom, by its very nature, implies that one has nothing to hide. Their purpose was to enslave Paul and his companions, specifically, to force Titus to be circumcised. This, too, was the goal of the men who had come down from Judea, as described in Acts 15, who said, "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). These false brethren

ren had no interest in the gospel; they wanted to protect tradition and preserve morality.

Paul's response to them was adamant: "we did not yield in subjection to them." He did not give in "for even an hour." Why not? "So that the truth of the gospel might remain with you," says Paul. This is an extremely important point. The truth and freedom of the gospel were at stake. If circumcision was necessary for salvation, then the gospel of salvation by faith alone would have been radically altered. This would be like saying that baptism was a necessary element of salvation today.

The result of Paul's refusal to yield was that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. Why was the apostle so adamant in his refusal to yield over this issue when his other companion, Timothy, was already circumcised? The answer is that since Timothy's mother was Jewish, he, too, was Jewish, and if he was not circumcised, that would have undermined Paul's ministry to the Diaspora Jews. Paul's philosophy of ministry is summed up in his words in 1 Corinthians: "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews" (1 Cor. 9:20). The issue then was evangelism. But the situation here in Galatians is much different. The issue was freedom for the Gentiles and what it was that granted them standing with God as believers. These are two radically different circumstances.

Verses 6-10 give the response of the church leadership to Paul.

But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter with the gospel to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

First, says the apostle, the leadership "contributed nothing to me," i.e., they did not add to or change his message. Paul refers to the apostles, James, Peter, and John, as men of "high reputation," men "reputed to be pillars." He is not being derogatory. His words were influenced by the fact that the Judaizers were exaggerating the status of the Jerusalem apostles at his expense. To Paul, the leaders were nothing special, because God shows no partiality. The apostle was not awed by leadership.

The result was that these pillars extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas. They agreed that Paul had been sent to the Gentiles, as Peter had been sent to the Jews. And they confirmed that Paul's message was the same as theirs. There was only one gospel, although the recipients of that good news came from different backgrounds. The leadership merely encouraged Paul to remember the poor, which he was eager to do.

This reference to the poor also gives weight to the theory that the visit being referred to here was Paul's visit concerning famine relief, described in Acts 11. This was the

very reason he had come to Jerusalem. Later, the apostle would continue to take collections for the poverty-stricken churches of Judea from the more wealthy churches of Asia Minor. Our freedom in Christ does not mean that we can neglect the poor and needy. Eugene Peterson comments: "A freedom that ignores or forgets or despises the poor is a bogus freedom. The poor are powerless to insist on their own rights or to negotiate their needs... The moment freedom is used to avoid acts of mercy or help or compassion, it is exposed as a fraud" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 66). Christians should heed the word of James: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

How can we apply to our lives this account of the threat to the gospel of freedom by these false brethren in Jerusalem? I will suggest three points of application.

Here is my first principle: We should expect to encounter situations where individuals will want to enslave us by limiting our experience of freedom in Christ.

Perhaps I can illustrate. My wife and I went back to school in Lincoln, Nebraska, when we were young Christians. There we came in contact with a group of students who wanted to start a Bible study. I volunteered to do some teaching. When a Christian organization on campus got wind of what was happening, they came to interview me. They were concerned with how often we were going to meet and other organizational matters, not whether the message I proposed to teach was biblical. They wanted to shut down the study or at least limit the frequency of our meetings. They saw that their function was to control all Christian ministry on campus. Instead of offering the right hand of fellowship, they slapped me in the face. I could only conclude that they felt threatened, because their control over campus ministry was in jeopardy. I was amazed at their antagonism toward me and their desire to control me. But I did not yield to them even for a short time.

Eugene Peterson has a word for us about this kind of mentality: "There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us; they want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others and try to get a sense of approval in insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth" (*Traveling Light*, 67).

As we study these opening chapters of Galatians it is my prayer that we will be able to identify areas where legalism is threatening our freedom and our sense of community. Legalism is not just an individual issue, it is a community problem. Legalism grows in the fertile soils of community, family and marriage, the very relationships that reflect how we relate to God. The central issue, as we have already seen, is control, what someone is or is not doing that makes them, in the opinion of legalists, unacceptable to God and to others. Tim Kimmel, who ministered to us a couple of weeks ago, has written extensively about this. Here is what he said about control in one of his books:

“For too many, control is the drug of the 1990’s. Those powerful personalities feel the only way to be under control is by being in control. And usually, that control is exercised at some other person’s expense... The tendency to control is basic to humanity. It’s that inner need for one personality to protect itself through the strength it can leverage against another.”

This was a problem two thousand years ago in Jerusalem and Galatia, and it is a problem today in church communities and in relationships. It takes hard work to identify areas where our freedom is threatened by someone or something that is forcing us to live under law. It also takes hard work and honesty to discern areas where we ourselves are seeking to control others. Threats to freedom take many different forms and guises. They can look good and moral, but they can be devastating to the freedom that God wants us to experience in Christ.

Let me give you some examples of what I am referring to. These are some of the issues that people wrestle with.

Is faith is enough, or do we need to be baptized to make sure we are saved and really acceptable before God?

All really good Christians read their Bible for 15 minutes every day.

I will never return to that church. Those people made me feel like a lesser Christian since I wasn’t part of a small group. They weren’t really concerned with me; they were just trying to control me.

I feel that really good Christian parents home school their children, and I don’t feel free to decide what is best for my family.

I feel rejected and controlled when my wife criticizes the way I dress.

My husband is so threatened by my life outside of the home that he controls and stifles me.

If I could get better grades, I know my parents would accept me.

I feel shame for not getting a hit with the bases loaded last night.

I could never do enough to win the approval of my parents.

The questions that I want you to explore are these: Is anyone or anything threatening your freedom in Jesus Christ? What is it that drives you to perform in order to gain acceptability? What is it that is stifling your freedom in Christ?

Here is my second principle: Like Paul, we must be willing to stand firm against threats to our freedom in Christ.

It’s remarkable how Paul stood against the disciples, the very pillars of the church, on this issue. Though outnumbered, he stood his ground. That takes courage. Once we identify the things and the people that control us and put us under law, then we must begin to stand against these and see them as threats to our freedom. It is well to remember also that this will not happen all at once, or once for all; it is a process.

One thing that will help us make a strong stand is our not being dependent on other people’s view of us, no matter how important they are. Paul was not controlled by how the pillars of the church viewed him, because he was

not overawed by them. As he stated, “what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality” (2:6). Paul was not star-struck by the apostolic band. It did not concern him whether he fitted into their group. He wasn’t a “wannabe.” He was confident of his identity in Christ, and the revelation that God had given him. He was not looking for approval. He knew that he was already approved despite the things that he had done in the past.

The reason we subject ourselves to the control of others is that our view of ourselves is too low and our view of them too high. And the reason why we seek to control others is that our view of them is too low and our view of ourselves too high. The way to maintain healthy and balanced relationships is to not be dependent on the approval of other Christians, but to see ourselves on the same level, with the same standing before God. There is only one Lord; we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter what talents, gifts or titles we possess. We are free when our sense of well-being does not depend on how others regard us.

Another thing that will help us take a strong stand in the face of legalism is our willingness to risk conflict. I must say that I hate conflict! I avoid it at all costs. I learned this from a wonderful man — my father. But I have learned how deadly this can be for me personally and how it contributes to my living under the law. I see this in my marriage and in my ministry. Oftentimes I will respond to needs because that is a part of ministry, but I put myself under law simply because I don’t want to refuse someone. It is because I want people to like me.

But Paul was not like that. When the integrity of the gospel was at stake, he didn’t care whether people thought well of him. After everything he had done in the past to persecute the church, in Jerusalem he had opportunity to impress the leadership and get them to like him, but instead he risked conflict and took on the false brethren right in front of the “pillars” of the church.

We need to see that conflict is not a negative thing. It is good to stand on objective truth, speak our minds and express our feelings. Being controlled by our emotions, manipulating people and being defensive are not proper behavior for Christians. I remember hearing Ray Stedman tell a story once of a young woman who was entering a Christian college. She was asked to sign a statement saying that she would not participate in certain things like dancing, smoking, drinking alcohol, listening to certain types of music, etc. She asked Ray if she should sign the statement. He told her to go ahead and sign it, but to put an addendum at the bottom saying she reserved the right to gossip, to have unkind thoughts about others, to backbite and slander! Conflict should not be regarded as a negative thing.

Here is my third principle: We are required by Scripture to enlarge our philosophy of ministry and our view of relationships to allow for uniqueness and creativity.

Paul and Peter had a common message, but different commissions. The church in Jerusalem did not have to control the church in Antioch. That is why they could extend the right hand of fellowship and accept that fact the God was working in a unique way in Antioch.

Freedom can be scary. It is difficult to accept and it is difficult to extend. We fear that if we fail to control people,

things will get out of hand. Actually the opposite is true. Control stifles life, loving and giving, while freedom enhances uniqueness and creativity. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). The challenge we face is to remove controls and allow freedom to flourish, building up others and encouraging their gifts and talents.

I can think of many examples where this truth can be applied. Take our new building, for example. This morning we heard an announcement of the financial need, and we were presented with just the facts. We are not trying to control you, to put you under law and tell you that you must give. We are not in a panic, feeling that everything has to be done before a certain date. We don't have to leverage strong personalities against you in order for you to give. There wouldn't be much joy in that, would there?

Another example arose a couple of weeks ago as we were planning our Sunday worship service. The man who had agreed to lead us in worship had to withdraw because of his work load. I told him not to worry about it, that we would find someone else. By the middle of the week, however, we had not found someone and I was becoming a little concerned. But, just when I felt like asking him to reconsider, and motivate him by law, God came to the rescue. One of our secretaries suggested someone, and that person led us and used his God-given gifts in a unique way.

One of the ways we might guard this truth at Peninsula Bible Church has to do with what validates us for ministry. We have a fine tradition of preaching and teaching at Peninsula Bible Church, but that, too, has its drawbacks. Some people feel that if they're not teaching and preach-

ing, they don't have a ministry. What we need to do is encourage each other's uniqueness. I have to say that I think you are a wonderful body of believers. You are a very gifted and talented community. I am privileged to be a part of you. You do a lot of things so much better than the staff and elders could do them, because we are not gifted in the same way. We do not want to control you and tell you what to do. We encourage you to minister in ways that God is calling you.

Encouraging others in their uniqueness and creativity can be practiced in many different ways. For example, we can encourage creativity in music. Even if we aren't enthusiastic about certain kinds of music, we should not try to control others. We can encourage people to read authors that feed their souls, even if we aren't personally excited about a particular author. This principle can have a dramatic effect in our homes. For many years I tried to control my wife, to make her into the person I wanted her to be, but now I see how important it is to encourage her in the ways that God has gifted her. So think about areas where you can express your creativity and encourage others to do the same. We do not have to look the same as others and others do not have to look the same as us. We are free to love and serve with originality, and so are others.

Our text today reminds us that there will be threats to our freedom in Christ. We must be willing to stand firm against them, even to the point of risking conflict, and in the process grant to others around us freedom for expression and creativity. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that, too, is Paul's gospel. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1).

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