



THREATS TO FREEDOM, II

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 2:11-21
Fifth Message
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A painting of a pheasant in flight attracted my eye a few years ago at a gallery in Fisherman's Wharf, in San Francisco. When my wife and I inquired as to its price, the gallery attendant said, "Twenty-five." We were amazed at the low price. "Let's get it," my wife said. "The frame alone is worth that much." Hearing our conversation, the attendant quickly brought it to our attention that he meant twenty-five *hundred* dollars. We quickly left the gallery, laughing to ourselves at how low our estimate of the painting had been.

At times it's hard know the value of things. Many Christians, for example, do not really know the value of God's grace and what he has done for us in his Son. It is because we don't understand how much he values us.

Our studies in the book of Galatians have centered on the subject of Christian freedom. We are learning why and how we can live free lives in Christ as opposed to living life under the law. At the outset I want to say that there is a close connection between living freely and knowing the value that we have in God's eyes. Thomas Paine said: "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; 'tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated."

Our study this morning in Galatians 2 brings us to the conclusion of Paul's autobiographical notes. These verses mark the transition to his argument to the churches of Galatia. In some ways this section is a sequel to our study last week; that is why I have entitled this message, "Threats to Freedom, II." As we have already seen, the chapter poses two threats to Christian freedom. The first threat, which we looked at last week, took place in Jerusalem, in the presence of the pillars of the church. The second, which we will look at today, occurred in the city of Antioch, in a confrontation between Peter and Paul.

We begin reading at verse 11 of chapter 2:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:11-15, NASB)

Peter was demonstrating his freedom in Christ by eating with Gentiles but, when "certain men from James" ar-

rived, he withdrew and separated himself from them. He did so because he feared the "party of the circumcision," according to Paul. This should come as no surprise. Peter often had problems with what other people thought about him. He was afraid of doing things that were contrary to public opinion. At one point during his ministry, Jesus told him, in response to what Peter deemed a good idea, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Matt 16:23). It was fear that drove Peter to deny the Lord three times before the cock crowed. Then, by the Sea of Galilee, although Jesus penetrated his heart with the question, "Do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15), Peter was concerned about the apostle John and what would happen to him. Here it says that he feared the "party of the circumcision." Even though Peter was a new man in Christ, he still had a tendency to be a man-pleaser, because he feared the disapproval of his peers.

Once again we see that one of the main causes of legalism is people's fear of being disapproved of by their peers. Many Christians succumb to living under the law because they base their sense of identity and approval on how others view them. As we have already learned, this was the very thing that was causing trouble in the churches of Galatia. Gentile Christians, who had no history of Judaism, were being seduced by agitators and troublemakers, because these new believers desired that sense of belonging and acceptance that came with Jewish identity markers.

Notice that Peter's actions affected others and how quickly they were carried away by the deception. Even Barnabas, Paul's right hand man, joined in the hypocrisy. Legalism is a gangrene that can poison an entire community. No one wants to be the odd man out. No one wants to be left standing when the music stops.

Peer pressure can be a deadly thing. This is illustrated by an experiment conducted by a psychologist who tested groups of teenagers. Each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one teenager in the group did not know was that the other nine had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line. The psychologist wanted to determine how one person reacted when completely surrounded by a large number of people who obviously stood against what was true. During the experiments the stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and raise his hand with the rest of the group. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there, agreeing that a short line was longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about seventy-five percent of the cases, and was true of small children and high-school students alike.

Legalism is an infectious disease caused by our fear of rejection and disapproval.

Paul responds to Peter with boldness — the same way he responded to the pillars of the church in Jerusalem. First, he responded in direct confrontation, opposing Peter face to face; then in public confrontation, addressing him in the presence of all. He confronted with straightforward logic, pointing out the hypocrisy of Peter's actions (14b). Paul didn't beat around the bush. Like Sergeant Friday, he simply stated the facts.

Paul inferred that Peter was being a hypocrite, compelling Gentiles to do what he as a Jew was not doing. My children adopt Peter's tactic at times. When I ask them to clean their room, for instance, they respond by saying that my room isn't clean. When I tell them to take their dishes to the sink, they tell me I haven't taken my dishes to the sink. They call me a hypocrite for making them do something I won't do myself. It was the same with Peter. He was asking the Gentiles to live like the Jews, under Torah, when he himself, a Jew, was living like the Gentiles who were not bound to live under the law. This was hypocrisy, because Peter had already accepted in principle the basic irrelevancy of Torah to Christian life.

The deeper issue, as we have already seen in Paul's private meeting with the "men of reputation" in Jerusalem, was the fact that the truth of the gospel was at stake. Peter was not walking uprightly. He was not upholding the truth of the gospel. Once again we detect the same principle that we saw last week. Threats to our freedom in Christ abound, and in order to guard them we must be willing to risk conflict, otherwise we will live under law.

Earlier we saw that the apostle risked conflict at a meeting in Jerusalem with the pillars of the church. In our text today Paul did not back away from possible conflict. He faced it, and spoke his mind. He respected Peter, but he was not overawed by him. By the way, Paul demonstrates a helpful method for handling conflict. Notice that he begins by asking a question. If you have to confront someone, this is a good approach.

This morning I want to focus on verses 14b-21, Paul's address to Peter. This speech marks the transition from the apostle's personal history to his argument to the Galatians, which begins in chapter 3, concerning the truth of the gospel and why Christians are no longer to live under law. These verses are rather theological and are somewhat difficult to follow, so I will explain the text by setting out four principles, through which I trust we will begin to see our proper value as Christians.

Verses 15-16:

"We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified."

Here is my first principle: If we live under law, then we do not really believe that we are accepted by God.

The apostle's opening point is that Christians are justified by faith, not by works of Torah. And this justification applies to both Jews and Greeks alike. All are justified in

the same way. All are sinners, and all fall short of the glory of God. Jews would have difficulty accepting this. They would not have regarded themselves as sinners (verse 15), but rather as Torah-keepers. But later, in verse 17, Paul implies that if a Jew sought to be justified in Christ, then he must indeed be a sinner.

This word "justified" is one of the most important terms in the Bible. Basically, the word means "being made righteous before God." I like John Stott's statement of the human predicament and our need for justification. Here is what he wrote, "There are at least two basic things which we know for certain. The first is that God is righteous; the second is that we are not. And if we put these two truths together, they explain our human predicament, of which our conscience and experience have already told us, namely that something is wrong between us and God. Instead of harmony there is friction. We are under the judgment, the just sentence, of God. We are alienated from His fellowship and banished from His presence, for 'what partnership have righteousness and iniquity?' (2 Cor. 6:14)" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 60).

And the basis of justification is faith in Jesus Christ, not works of law.

Notice that this phrase, "works of law," is used three times in verse 16. Faith in God, not works of law, is the only way man can be justified. This, too, was the message of the Old Testament. Psalm 143:2 declares, "by works of the law shall no flesh be justified." Left to his own devices, man can never do enough in order to be declared righteous before God.

Theologically speaking, justification means that Christians are declared righteous before God, because their sins are covered. Emotionally, justification means that Christians no longer have to prove themselves by doing things in order to have God approve of them. At the heart of legalism lies the notion that Christians, although they have been justified in Christ, still have to do something to be approved and accepted. We could say therefore that legalism is Christ plus works. Christians often live this way in relation with God, because this is how they relate to their peers.

Looking back on my own life, I now see that I was always seeking the approval of my parents through what I did. I became aware of this a few years ago when I went home for a visit during the time when my father was dying. When I offered to help out with any projects that needed attention, my mother suggested that an overgrown bush in the front yard needed to be uprooted. I offered to get rid of it, but she said I didn't have enough time to do so during my short visit. I insisted I could do the work in two hours, but she thought it would take a lot longer. At last I began the task. My father sat in a chair nearby as I set to work in the 100 degree heat and humidity. I slogged away, checking my watch from time to time for my self-imposed deadline. After a while my mother began to help me by collecting the roots and limbs and putting them in the trash. Finally the task was done — in just under two hours. I said to her, "I made it." She said, "You never would have if I hadn't helped you!" "By the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." I felt I needed to do something to win my parents' approval, and I ended up looking foolish: I already had their approval.

When our sense of acceptance and approval with God, parents, spouses, or members of the Christian community is dependent upon what we do, we are living under law. But when we are justified we no longer have to live that way. We are approved by God, and thus we are freed from the burden of trying to win approval from anyone. And this is a gift of God. He grants us as a free gift this approval in Christ; we could never attain it by our own efforts.

In verses 17-18, Paul anticipates a question from his critics.

“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.”

These verses give rise to my second principle: If we live under law, then we are traveling backwards in our spiritual journey.

Paul’s question in verse 17 is hard to understand. The apostle picks up the notion of being a sinner and being involved in sin. The word “transgressor” now takes the place of the word “sinner.”

Some feel that the apostle’s question arises out of a concern that if the law is thrown out, then sin and unholy living will abound. This is the issue that Paul deals with in Romans 6, but the answer he gives here does not fit with this understanding of the question. I think that to a Jewish mind, justification without the law means that Christ becomes a minister of sin, because justification implies that a Gentile can be justified without circumcision. The Jews assumed that those who did not keep the law were sinners, so uncircumcision equaled being a sinner. Believing in Christ equaled not being circumcised; therefore believing in Christ amounted to being a sinner with regard to the law.

Paul’s emotional response to this question is, “May it never be!” (just as in Rom. 6:1, 15). His logical response follows: “For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.” The apostle is saying that if Christians rebuild the law, and insist on obeying it, like Peter did in Antioch, like the Jews did who preached circumcision, like the Galatians were doing, and like we do when we seek to earn approval or acceptability, then we are transgressing against Christ himself. The one reverting to law puts himself back in the role of a transgressor. If we reinstate law in the place of Christ, then we are sinners all over again. F. F. Bruce comments: “Someone who builds up what he formerly demolished acknowledges his fault, explicitly in his former demolition or implicitly in his present rebuilding. If the one activity was right, the other must be wrong.”

Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. The law was merely a shadow, but in Christ the true Light has come. When Jesus died, the veil was rent in two. We now have access to God, entrance to the Holy of Holies, through him. The need for Torah is abolished once we enter into Christ. If we insist on rebuilding Torah, however, then we are going backwards. We are sewing together again the veil that was rent, because we feel more comfortable trying to earn our salvation. We are living like transgressors, trying to earn our salvation, rather than accepting our identity as the undeserving but justified saints that God declares us to be.

There are no ski slopes in Nebraska, so when I was growing up I learned to ski in Iowa. They had a hill in Iowa, one ski lift, and one run. Later, I skied in Colorado, in the majestic Rocky Mountains. There was no way I ever wanted to ski in Iowa again. After Colorado, who would want to do that? Christians are justified in Christ, as a free gift from God, yet many want to go back and live under the law again. Here is how Eugene Peterson describes this tendency: “The world hospital has its own programs for acquiring this sense of rightness: by imitating heroes, by listening to wise teachers, by engaging in programs of self-improvement, by practicing a system of morality or ritual ...What must be rejected out of hand is any return to the stifling existence of the hospital of the world which only makes sense out of life in terms of its sickness and sin” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 73, 78).

If we revert to law, then we are traveling backwards in our spiritual journey.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul touches on the notion that sin will run out of control if the law is abandoned.

“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.

Here is my third principle: If we live under law, we do not understand the transformation that took place in our lives when we were saved by faith.

Many Christians fear that if they tell people they are totally free, then sin will abound. For the Christian, however, law is eliminated and sin is abandoned *because* a transformation has taken place. We have become new creations in Christ, having been “rescued from this present evil age.”

In an amazing, supernatural event, the death of Christ changed our relationship to the law, for we died with Christ. F. F. Bruce describes what happened in these words: “Christ bore the curse of the Law and exhausted its penalty on his people’s behalf: in this sense Christ died [through law], and the believer’s death to the law is also ‘through law’ because he died in Christ’s death” (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Eerdmans, 1982] 143). Since I have died in my relationship to the law, I can no longer be a transgressor of the law unless I reinstate living by the law.

And what is the result of the Christian’s dying with Christ? Paul says, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.” An incredible transformation has taken place. No longer are we the same people; we have been permanently changed. There has been a change of lordship from sin to Christ, from Torah to Spirit. The risen Christ is the operative power in the new order, as sin was in the old. John Stott comments: “Someone who is united to Christ is never the same person again. Instead, he is changed. It is not just his standing before God which has changed; it is he himself—radically, permanently changed. To talk of his going back to the old life, and even sinning as he pleases, is frankly impossible. He has become a new creation and begun a new life” (*Galatians*, 65).

All of this is possible, says Paul, through “the Son of God who loved me and delivered Himself up for me.” And what effect did this have on Paul? Eugene Peterson says: “Paul...plunges into life. There is no cautious preparation; there is no long apprenticeship, no gradual approaches, no preliminary meditation on the lilies of the field... Crucifixion ends one way of life and opens up another... ‘The end is where we start from.’” (*Traveling Light*, 76, quoting T. S. Eliot, “The Four Quartets”).

Christians are given a new life, a new nature, and God bids us enter into life to live in freedom.

Paul concludes with a powerful statement in verse 21:

“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

Here is our final principle: If we live under law, we slap God in the face.

Paul says that if a Christian thinks that his acceptance before God and others is based on his efforts to keep Torah, then Christ died in vain. This is the ultimate affront to God. Legalism says to God that he can keep his grace, that his greatest gift, the death of his own Son, was insufficient. Paul insists that he will not nullify the grace of God, he will never allow it to be diminished or watered down by adding Torah. John Stott comments: “Yet there are large numbers of people who, like the Judaizers, are making these very mistakes...They think it noble to try to win their way to God and to heaven. But it is not noble; it is dreadfully ignoble. For, in effect, it is to deny both the nature of God and the mission of Christ. It is to refuse to let God be gracious. It is to tell Christ that He need not have bothered to die. For both the grace of God and the death of Christ become redundant, if we are masters of our own destiny and can save ourselves” (*Galatians*, 66).

“Whoever after the coming of Christ pleads the validity of the law, denies the saving significance of the death of Jesus Christ and nullifies God’s grace’ (H.J. Schoeps) ...For there are two ways of nullifying God’s grace, or receiving it ‘in vain’: one, by receiving it and then going on as though it made no difference by continuing to live ‘under law’, and the other, by receiving it and then going on as though it made no difference, by continuing to sin ‘that grace may abound’ (Rom. 6:1). In neither way does Paul nullify the grace of God: he refuses to return to legal bondage but at the same time he repudiates the suggestion that freedom from law means freedom to sin...had the works

of the law been sufficient to achieve this end, the death of Christ was superfluous” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 146-147).

Whenever we insist on living under the law, we are telling God that his Son died needlessly.

My wife bought me an expensive shirt for my birthday this year. After a few days, I returned it to the store. I can spend all kinds of money on my children, but I have a problem spending money on myself. I don’t feel I am worth it. This is what the apostle says we are doing if we live under the law. If we insist on living this way, we are returning God’s gift because we don’t believe that we are worth it.

As Christians, we have a hard time believing that we do not have to live under law any longer, that we are free from the curse of it. Can it all be true? we wonder. Believing that we are free begins with God and his gracious actions towards us. We need to hold up a mirror and ask ourselves what are we worth, and then look at God’s actions towards us and ask what they are worth. Whatever amount we come up with, we grossly under-calculate our value and the value of God’s grace. If we are going to be free, then we need to see our true worth in the grace of God and the love of his Son. That is the challenge, to really believe it, isn’t it?

Charles Wesley put it best in one of his most beautiful hymns, *And Can It Be?*

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th’ eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

May God grant that we will see our true value as believers in Christ, and that we will catch a vision of the inestimable value of Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf.

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