



EVALUATING OUR FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 973

Galatians 3:1-5

Sixth Message

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July 24th, 1994

Gary Richmond tells an enlightening story in his book *A View from the Zoo*, about a time when he was assigned to care for a cage of red-tailed hawks in the zoo health center where he worked. There were fifteen of them crowded together in a pitifully small cage. When he inquired as to the reason for their captivity, he found that the hawks were evidence for a court trial. Some men had caught them illegally and the birds were being kept at the zoo health center until the trial was over. When Gary inquired as to what would happen to the hawks after the trial, he learned that they had been there a long time and would probably die at the zoo.

This did not make sense to Gary. The poachers were free and the “poachees” were being punished. Nobody cared about their plight, and the red tape to get them released was so sticky, no one would wade through it. He concluded that there was only one answer: they must be let go. But it must look like an accident. He decided to let them go on a Tuesday afternoon, when the supervisors were at the animal health committee meeting.

When Tuesday came and the supervisors left, Gary made his way to the cage, slipped the lock out of the hasp, and left the door wide open. He looked around, saw that no one was in sight, and then slipped back into the health center. As he went about his work that day he was bothered that this group of birds had been robbed of their ecological purpose. He thought about freedom. He decided that freedom was the ability to fulfill the purpose for which you were created. He felt a great feeling of satisfaction.

After an hour he decided to check the cage. Astonishment, disbelief, wonder and confusion reigned supreme as he beheld all fifteen birds still in the cage. He thought they might need a little inspiration, and so he ran into the cage waving his arms and growling like a bear. The birds flew out, but they landed not ten feet from the cage door. They were confused, and it was clear that the hawks wanted back in the cage. He decided to leave the area, hoping that their instincts would take over. But when he returned in fifteen minutes, not one bird had felt any urges. In fact, some had walked back into the cage. Finally, Gary gave up. The hawks, which were designed to lift their wings to heaven, were now more comfortable being in captivity.

Sadly, many Christians find themselves caught in the same kind of trap. When we come to Christ, immediately we are freed from the grind of living under law; the door to our cage is flung wide open and we are free to soar. But, for some reason, many of us feel more comfortable remaining in our cage. That is because we find freedom to be a frightening thing. We are used to living within well-known, time-honored boundaries. It feels strange to be free from the confines of the law. It is much easier to live

by rules that others impose on us (and that we impose on others), rules like circumcision, observance of holy days, dress codes, worship styles, avoiding movies, controlled relationships, stifled creativity. We are Christians, and yet we may well have missed the point. Are we really free?

As we have been learning for the past several weeks, the book of Galatians is all about freedom. We have discussed what it means to live under law, and how living that way manifests itself in the church, in marriage and other relationships. We have learned that living under law is the state of being controlled by anyone or anything other than the Holy Spirit. Living under law involves striving for acceptability from God and from others through our own efforts to achieve and perform.

Sometimes we need a jolt to awaken us to what is going on in our spiritual lives. We imagine we can see others clearly, but we don't have a very clear picture of ourselves. We need to evaluate whether we are free or not. This can be a painful process, but it is an exercise we need to do for our own good on occasion. Plato, in his *Apology*, said: “The life which is unexamined is not worth living.” If we are going to free, we need to be honest with ourselves.

In our studies in this letter we have concluded the apostle Paul's autobiographical section, which began with verse 11 of chapter 1 and ended with the close of chapter 2. As we begin chapter 3 this morning, we find that Paul has a series of questions for the Galatians. He wants them to evaluate where they were headed, and the level of freedom they were experiencing. As we will see, the apostle asks five interesting and insightful questions. Chapter 3, verses 1-5:

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:1-5, NASB)

Paul's opening remarks seem uncharacteristically harsh and abrupt. He addresses his friends, “You foolish Galatians!” He repeats the adjective in verse 3, asking, “Are you so foolish?” The word “foolish” describes the error of the Galatians and it defines the underlying problem of their churches. It refers to the mind, the intellect, the reason. In the Old Testament, “foolish” is translated “without reason” (Prov. 17:28; 15:21). In the New Testament, the word describes a man lacking in understanding knowledge, and instruction. The opposite of “foolish,” of course,

is “wise” (Rom. 1:14; Luke 24:25).

The Galatians were foolish, without reason, in that they lacked understanding of the gospel and the promises of the Old Testament. They did not comprehend the difference between law keeping and faith. This is why Paul’s tone is so harsh. They did not understand the enormity of their error and the damage it was doing to the gospel of freedom in Christ. This was the underlying problem in Galatia, and this is what Paul will spend the rest of his letter addressing.

The apostle asks five questions that deal with how the Galatians began their spiritual journey. He wants them to make a common-sense evaluation of their spiritual lives. Of course, these are excellent questions for all Christians to ask themselves.

The first question has to do with their focus: “who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” “Who has bewitched you to take your focus off of Christ?” is the question. The word “who” is singular in the text. Perhaps this is a reference to Satan, not to the false teachers who were troubling them. “Bewitch” means to cast a spell by what in those days was called the “evil eye.” If this “evil eye” was detected in time, the effect of the spell could be averted by spitting. Some hold that this was the situation that Paul had in mind when he used the word “loathe,” literally “spit out,” in 4:14.

The Galatians had begun their walk of faith with the public proclamation of the cross, of “Christ and Him crucified.” They had clearly seen this through eyes of faith, but now that they had been bewitched by an evil eye, their vision had become clouded. The principle is obvious: as Christians, we maintain freedom when our focus remains on Christ. Anything that blurs our focus on Christ as the center of our faith will result in our being deceived and will cause us to drift into error.

The cross, of course, is central to the Christian faith. Here is what Eugene Peterson wrote about the crucifixion: “The single, overwhelming fact of history is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There is no military battle, no geographical exploration, no scientific discovery, no literary creation, no artistic achievement, no moral heroism that compares with it. It is unique, massive, monumental, unprecedented and unparalleled. The cross of Christ is not a small secret that may or may not get out. The cross of Christ is not a minor incident in the political history of the first century that is a nice illustration of courage. It is the center” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 86).

So Christians fall into legalism when their focus begins to change. And that change can be so subtle, we don’t notice it happening. We drift from an exciting, genuine, Spirit-filled life in Christ to living under the law, becoming stale and inauthentic Christians in the process. When this happens, we have been bewitched by Satan. And, as we have pointed out, often this is hard to detect. It seems like we are doing all the right things — we can even receive praise for doing them — but then we begin to make subtle suggestions about matters like acceptable worship, Bible study, discipleship, and evangelism. Before we know it, an entire Christian community is being controlled by law. Paul says that when this happens, we are being bewitched, fooled into religious activity that is not genuine Christiani-

ty or Christ-centered spirituality.

C.S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, had the demon uncle pen this extremely subtle maneuver to his nephew Wormwood, instructing him on how to handle his project: “My dear Wormwood, Through this girl and her disgusting family the patient is now getting to know more Christians every day, and very intelligent Christians too. For a long time it will be quite impossible to *remove* spirituality from his life. Very well, then; we must *corrupt* it. No doubt you have often practised transforming yourself into an angel of light as a parade-ground exercise. Now is the time to do it in the face of the Enemy. The World and the Flesh have failed us; a third Power remains. And success of this third kind is the most glorious of all. A spoiled saint, a Pharisee, an inquisitor, or a magician, makes better sport in Hell than a mere common tyrant or debauchee” (Letter 23).

Jesus said, “The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt. 6:22-23). We maintain Christian freedom when we keep our eyes clear and focused on Christ and him crucified.

Paul’s second question has to do with how the Galatians began their spiritual journey. He asks (verse 2b): “did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” “How did you begin your Christian life,” asks Paul, “by works of law or by hearing and believing?” The answer is obvious: they received the Spirit by faith. The principle too is obvious: we maintain freedom when we remember our beginnings. Faith and faith alone is all that is required to receive the Spirit and begin living the Christian life. No works of law will help accomplish what only God can do. Paul describes his own story of salvation in these words in chapter 1: “when He who had set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me” (1:15-16). God consented. God called. God set apart. God saved.

Did any one of you here this morning save yourself by good works? Of course you didn’t! That would be a foolish and ungodly thing to claim. Every person here has a wonderful story to tell of how God saved them and how they began their Christian life. Every one of you could tell how God orchestrated things to bring you to the place where you reached out to the Hand that had long been stretched out to you. It is almost an invariable rule that we come to Christ when we finally give up on our own efforts to satisfy the hunger of our hearts. No amount of works or achievements or good efforts could bring us what we wanted.

John Stott contrasts the law and the gospel in these words: “This is the difference between them: the law says ‘Do this’; the gospel says ‘Christ has done it all’. The law requires works of human achievement; the gospel requires faith in Christ’s achievement. The law makes demands and bids us obey; the gospel brings promises and bids us believe. So the law and the gospel are contrary to one another. They are not two aspects of the same thing, or interpretations of the same Christianity. At least in the sphere of justification, as Luther says, ‘the establishing of the law is the abolishing of the Gospel’” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 71).

How we began our walk with Christ, and how we con-

tinue on that journey, can sometimes be compared with the way we met our spouse and how our marriage has progressed. Many of us found that after years of frustration spent looking for the perfect mate, we finally give up. Then, when we had stopped looking, our future spouse appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, a totally unexpected gift. At once we experienced infatuation, joy, and unconditional acceptance. But then, very subtly, through years of marriage, this relationship, which began as a gift, changed to a law-based thing. We began to make demands, seeking to control our spouse in an effort to have our expectations met. Healthy marriages, however, are maintained by remembering how the relationship began in the first place. In the same way, we maintain our freedom in Christ when we remember that our journey began humbly, by faith and faith alone.

Paul's third question has to do with how the Galatians intended to complete the Christian life. He asks, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" This is Paul's most important question, the main thing he wants the Galatians to evaluate. How did they intend to complete the Christian life?

They began, of course, with the Spirit, through faith in Christ crucified. Did it make sense to finish with the flesh, by means of their own efforts (as the troublemakers were suggesting) what had begun without their help? This is a commonsense question. The answer, and the principle, are clear: we maintain our Christian freedom by being constantly aware that the flesh will not help us in the end anymore than it did in the beginning.

We begin our Christian experience by faith, with Spirit, but if we insist on reverting to law, what we are doing, in effect, is saying to God, "Thanks a lot for the start, but now I can get along quite nicely on my own." That is wrong thinking; it lacks common sense. What makes us think we can accomplish on our own what we could not even begin to do without the help of the Holy Spirit? The flesh could not save us then; what makes us think it can do so now? The flesh never changes. It does not get any better. Whatever the flesh accomplishes, no matter how good the result looks, will not change or enhance our acceptability before God, because we are accepted in Christ and in him alone.

When we begin to live in a legalistic way, we no longer are living under the control of Spirit; we are under the control of our own flesh — or someone else's. Living under the law stimulates our flesh to perform religious activity — and we can do all kinds of religious things in the flesh. The flesh can preach a sermon, for instance. The flesh can sing in the choir. The flesh can lead people to Christ. We begin by the Spirit, but then try to perfect ourselves through our own efforts, our own adequacy, our own abilities. We may have the right standard, but it will not work if we are living in our own strength. If we are not relying on the Spirit, then we will not finish like we began. Eugene Peterson says, "We are out of touch with reality when we need someone else or some thing—circumcision? a baptismal certificate? a bumper sticker? a pectoral cross?—to verify our existence" (*Traveling Light*, 88).

When I came to Christ, a friend gave me a cross and chain to wear around my neck. I wore it as a symbol of what God had done in my life, a reminder to me of the transformation that had taken place in my spirit. After

some time had gone by, however, the cross seemed to take on a different significance. When I put it around my neck in the morning, no longer was it a sign of God's grace, but a sign that God was with me. If I forgot to put it on, I felt I was in for a bad day. One day I lost it. I was devastated. I felt I would never again have God in my life and that everything would go wrong. But, of course, nothing could be further from the truth. God was still with me. I even began to see that his hand probably was behind my losing that cross. How often we find our Christian lives drifting from reliance on God alone to dependence on other, external things as we seek to complete in the flesh what he began in the Spirit.

Christian freedom is maintained by keeping in step with the Spirit. This requires constant evaluation, because it is easy to drift off course.

Now we come to Paul's fourth question. He asks: "Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain?" The apostle is asking, "Have you undergone a change in values?" When they began their walk with Christ, they valued the cross. They valued things like persecution, suffering, and relationships. They were willing to die for Christ. We have already seen that part of the seduction of the Galatian Christians was that the Jewish identity marks, those owned and recommended by the agitators and troublemakers, brought political safety for their bearers. But now they were beginning to think they could, without cost, live lives that were pleasing to God. They were valuing ease and comfort more than the cross. Paul is implying that if they sought to finish the race in the flesh, then the things they had endured and suffered in the Spirit would have gone for naught.

The principle raised by Paul's question is this: Christians maintain their freedom by keeping sight of their values. False values lead to empty lives.

It is amazing what can happen to us when we begin to take our lives back from God. We imagine that if we can perform works of law for part of the time, then we can live the way we would like the rest of the time. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We think we can live self-centered lives and fool everyone, including God, by maintaining the Torah identity marks — attending Bible study, using the right terminology, appearing to be concerned about others but not setting aside the time to meet with them, etc. That, says Paul, is living in vain. What happened to our values? What happened to the times when we used to stay up all night and pray for someone to come to Christ? What happened to the times when we would refuse to compromise? What happened to the times when we faced rejection because we stood on the cross of Christ? Torah can change our values, because Torah is accepted by society. But it would be a tragic thing if, after years of Christian joy and suffering, we failed to finish the course. Christian freedom is guarded with healthy values: worship, relationships, forgiveness, salvation.

This brings us to Paul's final question: "Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" In other words, was it works of law or hearing with faith that caused God to provide (supply) the Spirit and work miracles in your life? This is a similar question to the one the apostle asked in verse 2. However, here the subject switches to God, the one who supplies the Spirit and the one who works with power to transform the inner

man.

“Provide” means “to be filled with gaiety.” The root word is “dance,” combined with “lead.” The word came to mean “to defray the cost of a dance,” and then, metaphorically, “to furnish abundantly” — in other words, to throw a lavish, celebrative dance. What this implies is that there is plenitude with God. Paul is implying that the Galatians had experienced the abundant supply of God: Spirit, miracles, transformation. All of this had been received through faith, not law.

Christian freedom is maintained by remembering that God is the source of life and transformation, and that all of this comes to believers as a gift. Remembering this will help us to continue to live by faith and not resort to law.

This critical issue centers on our understanding of the nature of the Father and what causes him to respond to us. What prompted God to supply his Spirit to us in abundance? Did we work for it? No. Did we deserve it? No. It was based solely on God’s grace. Nothing we did in the past prompted God to work miracles in our behalf, so it is logical to conclude that there is nothing we can do to make God act graciously in our behalf in the future. When we are living under law, however, we begin to regard God as a stingy father who has to be manipulated to give to us, rather than a gracious Father who meets all of our needs abundantly in Christ.

What this question really deals with is motivation, why we do what we do. We perform works of law because we are bewitched into thinking that we are not accepted by God. We perform religious activity so that God will grace us. We stop asking and start doing instead. This in turn leads to false motivation — pleasing others, gaining prominence, acquiring reputation. But if we understand that

God is the source of life, that he is the one who supplies out of his grace, with abundance, then we are free to glorify, honor and serve him. The whole of the Christian life is a response to the love exhibited in the death of the Son of God for men; and the essential ingredient to freedom comes from understanding God’s character.

How do you measure up on this evaluation? Are you free from the control of law-based relationships, or are you sitting in the cage with the door wide open?

Is your focus on Christ or are you being bewitched by the master deceiver?

Did you begin with the Spirit?

Are you now trying to complete the process by yourself, through the flesh?

Have your values changed?

Do you see God as a gracious giver and your life loving response to him?

These are common-sense, simple questions. None of us can claim to have met the ideal. But let’s be honest with ourselves, no matter how painful that might be. If we are willing to be honest, then we can claim the freedom that is ours in Christ. We can take to flight and leave the cage behind.

My own search for freedom began when I became willing to do this evaluation. Even though I could do a lot of apparently “good” things, I was hiding behind legalism. The door to freedom was wide open, but I was in a cage. I had to be willing to be honest, to admit that something in my life was not right, that God’s Spirit was not controlling my life. An honest evaluation: there is no better place to begin a spiritual journey.

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