



THE KEY TO FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 3:25–4:7
Seventh Message
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A popular song sung by Reba McEntire expresses a child's desire for a father's love and acceptance:

The greatest man I never knew
Lived just down the hall
And everyday we said hello
But never touched at all
He was in his paper
I was in my room
How was I to know he thought I hung the moon

The greatest man I never knew
Came home late every night
He never had too much to say
Too much was on his mind
I never really knew him
and now it seems so sad
Everything he gave to us took all he had

Then the days turned into years
And the memories to black and white
He grew cold like an old winter wind
Blowing across my life

The greatest words I never heard
I guess I'll never hear
The man I thought would never die
S'been dead almost a year
He was good at business
But there was business left to do
He never said he loved me
Guess he thought I knew

The power of a father's love is an awesome thing. A proper understanding of this truth is the key to experiencing freedom in Christ.

During the past six Sundays, we have learned much about this freedom that Christians possess. Today, we reach the end of our studies in Galatians for the time being. We have not arrived a point where there is a natural break in the text, so there are yet many unanswered questions. But, now that we have begun to think about freedom, I don't want to leave us hanging, so I have decided to give you the bottom line today. I am going to skip to the end of chapter 3 (something unheard of in the annals of PBC!). What I want to do is to give you the focal point of the book, and the key, foundational truth to understanding Christian freedom.

To say that I have been excitedly looking forward to teaching this text is an understatement. I feel that my whole life has been geared toward teaching this one truth today. This message will finish something I began a long time ago. So when I have finished this morning, I will be

expendable (not that I already wasn't!). I pray that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts to this powerful truth. I hope I can communicate even one tenth of what I myself have seen and experienced.

We have already learned what living under law involves. Living under law, we determined, is being controlled by anything other than the Holy Spirit. The primary issue with living this way is control. This manifests itself in various ways. In Galatia, we saw that the law that was being pushed by the troublemakers involved what we have called Jewish identity markers: circumcision, holy days, foods, etc. Today, Christians make laws about worship, dress, ministry, Bible study, etc., which they then impress upon others. In marriage and in parenting, with respect to law, control is always the issue. We make laws about all kinds of things in order to control others.

But the problem isn't necessarily inherent in the law itself. The problem, technically, is living under what Paul calls the "curse of the law." And the curse of the law is that we feel guilt, shame and failure when we don't do what we think we should be doing, or when we put others under guilt and shame when they don't do what we think they should be doing. For example, reading the Bible is a good thing, but what is important is whether we read our Bibles legalistically or freely. Christian freedom does not imply that we can throw out the law and live any way we like. Rather, freedom means that we do not feel controlled ourselves, or feel the need to control others. (Paul will eventually say that Spirit is to replace Torah in the Christian's life.)

We have also looked at why we are so susceptible to living under law. We saw that the primary issues in Galatia, and in our own lives, are things like acceptance, identity, status, approval. When we don't feel accepted, we try to perform and achieve in order to gain acceptance. We do this in all our relationships: with God, with parents, children, friends, and other Christians. And the way we do it is through keeping Torah — keeping religious or other laws that people impose on us, or laws that we impose on ourselves. But Galatians teaches that we are accepted by God in Christ. There is nothing we can do to gain this; Christ did it all. And there is nothing that we can do or not do that will change our identity in Christ.

Now it is true that we hear a lot about acceptance today, but if we stop there we have not gone far enough; we will not experience true freedom. The book of Galatians goes one step further. It reveals what is behind acceptance, what drives us to seek identity, and why we hunger for approval. What is it we are looking for? This is the most important thing to get right in the Christian life. If we get this right, we will have it all. But if we do not get it right, then things like Bible study, ministry, and striving for ap-

proval will not touch the deepest hunger of our hearts.

With that as background, I will read our text, Galatians 3:25-4:7:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal 3:25-4:7, NASB)

This text forms the very core of the book of Galatians. Everything we have studied so far brings us to this point; everything we will study from now on flows from it. There is more truth in these verses than I can possibly talk about on one Sunday morning, so we will look at these verses again in more detail when we return to our studies.

In verses 26 through 29, Paul sets out three results of our being in Christ: we are "*sons of God*"; we are "*one in Christ*"; we are "*heirs according to promise*." For now, all I want to talk about is one of these results of our being in Christ, the fact that we are "sons of God." When we enter into Christ, we become sons of God. Of course, when I say "son," I mean "daughter" as well. Paul himself says, "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ." The reason we can be free from law is that we are "sons of God."

Notice that the apostle highlights three relationships, namely, child, slave, and son. (David Eckman was very helpful in pointing out this to me.) First, this word "child." A child is one who is in need of protection and patronizing. The Greeks deemed a child to be one between the ages of 1 and 10. (The term was also used of the unprotected orphan.) Paul uses this word so as to emphasize vulnerability and the need for growth. In Ephesians, he refers to "children being tossed to and fro by changing doctrines." In 1 Corinthians, he uses the term with regard to simple speaking and teaching and setting aside immature and childish things. A child is "under law," under guardians and managers, until he reaches the time set by his father to become an adult son. In this a child is no different than a slave. Even though he is an heir by promise, he is not yet in an heir in his experience, because he is still a child.

In Paul's analogy, the child is the Jew under Torah. It was the law that protected the Jews and shepherded them through their growing up years. But as long as the Jew is under Torah, he is no different than a Gentile even though he possesses all the heritage of the Old Testament. He has the promise, but not yet the experience. Rather, he is under

the "elemental things of the world."

The Greek word that is used for "elemental things" (rudimentary principles) has two meanings. First, it can refer to the letters of the alphabet learned at school, i.e., first principles (Heb. 5:12). Second, it can refer to the elementary, physical elements of the universe (2 Pet. 3:10, 12), things like earth, fire, air and water, or heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon and stars. This second meaning seems to fit 4:8, which speaks of being in bondage to beings "which by nature are no gods," but demons or evil spirits. (The devil has taken that which is good and twisted it in order to enslave men and women.) Here Paul links Torah with the simple, oppressive principles of this world. Many commentators think that the apostle felt these things were demonically energized. Returning to Torah, then, is like being enslaved to idols. The term "child" implies that Christians are to reach adulthood. The analogy indicates tragedy if we remain as children and fail to experience sonship.

The second relationship mentioned by Paul is that of a slave. In the apostle's day, slaves lived in fear. "The spirit of slavery is fear" (Rom. 8:15). A slave had no rights. His master could torture, kill, shame and humiliate him with impunity. A slave could not represent himself in a legal action; he had to be represented by his master. He was subject to having a hand laid upon him by anybody. In other words, he was subject to seizure and arrest. A slave could not do what he wished, but had to do what the master ordered. In order to be released from slavery, he had to be sold to a god; and both the owner and the slave had to agree to this arrangement.

Torah, law, is similar to the orders of a master to a slave in that it has to be obeyed blindly and well. The appeal is to the will, never to the heart. Law produces fear and captivity, the opposite of freedom. In Paul's analogy, the Gentiles were like slaves. They were in the house, but unlike the child, they had no future hope of becoming an heir. In verse 8, the apostle says the Gentiles were "slaves to those which by nature are no gods." These Gentiles had come to Christ, but if they put themselves under Torah, they were becoming slaves to the "elemental things" once more.

Notice that Paul uses "Torah" and "elemental things of the world" interchangeably. It makes no difference whether one is a child under Torah or a slave under "elemental things"; both the Christian and the non-Christian are under law. Neither the slave nor the child experiences freedom; neither enjoys the type of relationship that God wants him to have.

The third relationship mentioned by Paul, that of an adult son, is the one that God desires for us. It is a relationship of freedom, of being neither child nor slave, but an adult son. Paul uses the word "son," and the phrase "adoption as sons," or sonship. Sonship is the heart of the gospel. It is not a legal, but rather a family relationship: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. It is not a relationship of fear, but one of affection.

In the Roman world, "son-placing" was a ceremony in which a child received a change in status from child to adult. It was a notable day in his life when a child became a man, an adult son. He would receive a new toga, signifying his new status. (This ceremony was also used by Roman emperors who adopted men other than blood rela-

tives to succeed them in authority. Following the ceremony, the new son had the same rights as any child born in the home.) Paul says that this is the relationship Christians now have as a result of their being in Christ.

Notice how the apostle describes this new relationship. First, the event: "God sent forth His Son...God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son." Second, the timing: "now that faith has come," "when the fullness of the time came." Third, the results: We are no longer under the tutor, the guardian of Torah (3:25); we are clothed with Christ (3:27). (The reference may be to the *toga virilis*, which a boy would put on during the sonship ceremony.) Christ redeemed those who were under Torah that we might receive the adoption as sons (4:5). Because of God's Spirit, we have intimacy with the Father, and we can address him as "Abba, Father" (4:6). "Abba" is the word Jesus himself used in intimate prayer to God. "When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16). Thus, God's purpose was not only to secure our sonship by his Son, but to assure us of it by his Spirit. Eugene Peterson comments: "The gift of sonship confers the privilege of the child to address the Father with intimacy" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 117). And finally, we are "no longer a slave but a son and...an heir through God" (4:7).

And what was the means to our adoption as sons? Paul says it was "through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:26). There is no other qualification, no formula, no extra condition. It is by faith in Christ that both a child and a slave, both Jew and Greek, become sons. God first sent his Son to die for us and then sent his Spirit to live in us. He sent his Son that we might have the status of sonship, and he sent his Spirit that we might have an experience of it. John Stott comments: "So the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ and righteousness of Christ uniquely qualified Him to be man's redeemer. If He had not been man, He could not have redeemed men. If He had not been a righteous man, He could not have redeemed unrighteous men. And if He had not been God's Son, He could not have redeemed men for God or made them the sons of God" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 106).

This is what the story of the prodigal son illustrates in such a powerful way. The parable describes a father and his two lost sons. One was lost in the house, the other was lost outside the house. The son in the house was like the child: he had never experienced sonship, even though he was heir to everything. The prodigal left the home and became like a slave. Then he devised a plan to ask if his father would take him back as a slave. But when his father saw him on the horizon, he made him a son, an adult son. He gave him his finest robe, conferring upon him the identity of sonship. But the story doesn't end there. The father had the same desire for the son who had always been with him.

This is the key to becoming free. We must become adult sons of our Father. This is what hits at the deepest hunger of our hearts. This is why teenagers struggle: they want to be recognized as adult sons and daughters, yet the time for law has not yet run its course. And this is why Paul is so harsh and abrupt in his remarks to the Galatians. If anyone would seek to put them under Torah and cancel out their sonship, then, says Paul, "let him be accursed" (1:8). Later

Paul will tell the agitators that if they are so bent on circumcision, then they should castrate themselves! He says this because sonship is the most exalted relationship we can aspire to. The problem with Torah is that it forces us to live as children and slaves.

There will be times when we will come to our Father as his children, and other times when we view ourselves as slaves of Christ, but our primary identity is as a son or daughter of God. If we don't grasp this and begin to live it out in our daily lives, then we will function not out of a sense of freedom, but of law. This is the biggest problem we face as Christians — confusing identity and function. We try to function without a clear sense of our identity. But once we get our sense of identity right, as adult sons and daughters of the Father, then everything will flow out of Spirit. If I truly believe I am a son, then I will do the Father's will. I am an heir to the kingdom. Against such things there is no law. In fact, because I am a son, I will go way beyond the demands of the law. But I will function out of complete and utter freedom.

What form does your relationship with God take? Are you a child, a slave, or a son? Sonship is the essence of freedom, but all too often we live like children or slaves. We may say we are sons and daughters, but we really are not. May God grant that, beginning today, we will begin to see ourselves for who we really are, sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ.

The book of Galatians is the story of my life, and I have already shared part of that with you. Two years ago, as I was studying this book, I began to be honest with myself. I knew what the term "Son of God" meant, but I did not feel like an adult son of God. Another image better described my frame of mind. I felt that if I walked into my Heavenly Father's house, I would not have the freedom to sit down and make myself at home. Rather, I would sneak up the stairs without saying a word, go into my room and close the door.

Why did I feel that way? I did not have a bad home life growing up. Certainly mine was not an abusive home. My parents loved me. But I had a painful ache in my heart ever since I could remember. My brothers were much older than I, so I grew up almost as an only child. My mother was dominant, my father rather passive. From my mother I got rules and regulations. She was the law, the Torah that kept me from my Father's love, and I was a child to that law. My father was indeed the "greatest man I never knew." Everyone who knew him loved him, but I didn't have the deep conversations with him that I longed for. We enjoyed golf and hunting, but there were times when he was absent. I don't remember him being at very many of my baseball games. "Everything he gave to us took all he had," as the song says. When I wrecked the car, "he was in his paper, I was in my room." Hence the law came into play in my life. I used it not only to gain acceptance, but to become a son.

I always sought a close relationship with my brothers since we were not close in age. But that has not been easy. I would travel to see them, but they would do all the talking. When I spoke, they didn't seem interested. Hence the law came into play again in my life. I used it not only to gain acceptance, but to become a brother. I tell people I am

hard to get to know. Is it any wonder?

I started life as a child in my parents' house, but instead of being led to Christ, I became a slave of idols, "those which by nature are no gods." And so I understand being a child and a slave. This was how I grew up.

When I came to Christ, I became a child of God. I had a wonderful honeymoon experience with the Lord, but as I began to work out my new life in this new family, I quickly went back to relating as a child and a slave to law. I found it confusing that I had freedom in Christ in many ways. I wasn't put off by the things that typically trip up some Christians, but I wasn't free because I wasn't a son. It is hard for me to believe that I am a son.

One situation brought all of this to a head. I have told you about how I was under the law when I came to work at PBC. The deep sense of disapproval and lack of acceptance I encountered led me to even greater inner pain, and once again I resorted to the law as the solution. At one point it became clear that I would not be at PBC much longer. Despite my best efforts, there were those who said that I should no longer be here, that perhaps I should no longer even be a pastor. One day I called home and talked to my father. He had never thought much of my being a pastor. (He kept asking when I would get a real job!) He inquired how things were going, and I told him I was having a difficult time. I probably wouldn't be working here much longer, I said. He said something I will never forget: "They just don't know what a great guy they've got." I thought to myself, "Dad, I know you love me, but I never knew what you thought of me." Those were the words I had longed to hear all my life. "How was I to know he thought I hung the moon." At last I felt like a son to my father.

Finally, I reached the same point in my relationship with God. I became honest with God, because I realized that unless I got this right, then I would never be free. And so my prayer became, "Father, I want to feel like a son." I knew I didn't deserve it, but I knew that if I didn't feel like a son, then nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if I kept Torah, if I was involved in ministry, if I avoided sin. I had worked hard at these things for a long time and they didn't minister to the deep longings of my heart.

God forced me to meditate on these verses from Galatians. After some painful months, the dust settled and I began to experience something I had never felt before. Very quietly, but very genuinely, I began to feel like a son of God. It was the most wonderful thing I ever felt in my life. I don't want to mislead you. I don't sense this all the time, every minute. But now I feel that when at last I enter into my Heavenly Father's house, I will want to sit down at the table. There will be two men there, my Heavenly Father and my earthly father, and I will say to both of them, "Hi, Dad." And they will both say to me, "How are doing, son?"

In 1973, I became a child of God, and in 1993, I became a son of God.

I have learned two very important truths as a result of my journey. First, I now have a great sense of freedom in my relationship to my parents. God never intended that my deep hunger for sonship would be met through my earthly father. My relationship with my father only created that hunger. The whole family structure and the failure that many of us experience are designed to awaken this desire. It was this hunger and desire that kept bringing me back to my relationship with God. God, my Heavenly Father, wanted to fulfill this longing.

The second truth I have learned concerns the great sense of freedom I now have in being a parent. For years I tried to give my children the things I perhaps did not have when I was growing up, so I coached everything from checkers to baseball. Often this resulted not in freedom, but in control. But now I have learned and I am willing to accept the fact that I cannot be everything to them. I can model fatherhood, I can seek over the years to grant them a place as adult sons and daughters, but I would be extremely selfish if I continued to treat them merely as children, because I don't own them. Ultimately my desire is to awaken the hunger of their hearts so that they too might enjoy the same relationship that I have begun to experience with my Heavenly Father.

Our hunger to be approved is really a hunger for sonship with our Heavenly Father. The key to Christian freedom is that the Son has set us free by making us sons. We are sons of God, and because we are in Christ, we hear the Father's voice saying to us, once and for all, "You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased."

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