



THE BEGINNINGS OF FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 3:6-14
Eighth Message
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In 1979, when I was working as an engineer, I spent some time in Germany installing a computer system at an airbase. I had never been to Germany before, and I do not speak the language, but my family heritage is German. I found it intriguing that when I experienced German culture first hand, I felt very much at home. I learned why I am the way I am, why I liked certain things, etc. For instance, I discovered why I like bratwurst, braunschweiger, summer sausage and yagersnitzel! I discovered why, when someone offers me a vegetarian delicacy, I respond by saying, "I've never been that hungry!" Everywhere I traveled in Germany I saw reminders of my childhood. I had memories of being at grandmother's, indulging in fourteen varieties of homemade bread, three types of meat, and having an hour nap after a two-hour meal. I thought to myself, no wonder I am driven by schedules and plans. I learned that Germans do not deviate from their plans. I was overwhelmed by a sense of connectedness, family, and cultural roots. Even though I do not live in Germany, I "think" German. I am connected to German history.

Our sense of heritage and family shapes who we are and why we act the way we do. This is true also of our spiritual history. A sense of spiritual family and connectedness is extremely important if we will live by faith and have a deep spirituality as did our spiritual fathers and forefathers. To experience this it is imperative that we get our spiritual history right.

At the heart of the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians lies a profound and essential history lesson designed to enlighten us about our historical perspective, family heritage, and spiritual roots. The theme of this book revolves around living freely as opposed to living under law. Paul wrote this letter to counteract the teaching of certain agitators and troublemakers who sought to control Gentile believers in Galatia by putting them under the Jewish identity markers of circumcision, holy days, Jewish food laws, and others aspects of the Jewish ceremonial laws. These men were teaching that the Galatians' acceptance before God depended not just on Christ, but on Christ plus works of law. Earlier in the book, in chapter 1, we read that Paul cursed these troublemakers to divine destruction; while in chapter 3, he labeled the Galatians as foolish airheads.

We have defined living under law as placing ourselves under the control of anything other than the Spirit of God. Living like this can manifest itself in different ways. For example, it can define the way we relate to

God and conduct ourselves in church. It can describe how we relate to our spouses and our families. Living under law, therefore, has to do with relationships. The issue, of course, is control. Our primary relationship is the one that we have with God. If we live under law in this area, then our relationships with others will be skewed.

As I immersed myself in this text I was confronted with the fact that I am a card-carrying legalist. Legalism permeates many of the things that I regard as a normal part of life. I even approach the game of golf in a legalistic way. Years ago when I played golf, I used to score in the 70's. One day my son asked me if I would ever break 80 again. Hearing this had the effect of placing me under a law. For the past several years, breaking 80 has been my goal in golf.

Deep in our hearts we desire to live free, to experience a deep spirituality in which our relationship with God is based on acceptance and enjoyment. We are truly free when we experience relationships that are not based on performance, on mazes of convoluted dependencies, but relationships that are characterized by grace, love, and mutual acceptance. Freedom in Christ means that we have been rescued from this present evil age. We have been crucified, separated from the world. Freedom means that we are not tied to this physical world, but that we live in the invisible world of spiritual realities, a world that is "already, but not yet."

That sounds wonderful, but this kind of freedom is hard to come by. It was hard for the Galatians; it is hard for us, too. The reason we are so susceptible to living under law is that we crave identity, security, and acceptance. This was why the Gentile Christians in Galatia were coming under the control of agitators and troublemakers who demanded they keep Jewish Torah. Like them, we too base our behavior on the approval of others. We try to gain approval from God by keeping Torah; and approval from people by keeping the laws they impose upon us. We must remember that we will always face threats to our freedom in Christ. Paul himself faced these threats in Jerusalem, when church leaders wanted Titus circumcised. Peter faced threats in Antioch, when he succumbed to Jewish pressure and stopped eating with Gentiles.

Freedom, then, is a scary business. Living under law is much easier, because law gives definition. We know where we stand and what we are supposed to do—how many meetings we need to attend, how many acts of

service to perform, how many phone calls to make. But this is not the kind of freedom that finds its source in God, directed through his Holy Spirit. The apostle's piercing question, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3) finds its mark, doesn't it?

As we return to our studies in Galatians, we pick up the apostle's text today in the middle of his epistle. For the next six Sundays we will be deeply engrossed in Paul's main argument to the Galatians. This is heavy, theological stuff. It is laced with Old Testament quotes. The argument confronts us with the deepest issue of freedom, and that is sonship. As we have said, our primary relationship in life is the one we have with God, and at the core of this relationship is sonship. We need a history lesson to help us understand our spiritual history, our spiritual family, our historical roots. Just as Germany connects me physically to centuries of history, Galatians 3 and 4 connect me spiritually to centuries of faith and freedom in Christ.

Our text today is verses 6 through 14 of chapter 3. In this passage we will highlight three basic principles, the first of which we find in verses 6-9:

Even so Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Here Paul goes back in time to his primary example and witness for his argument, back to father Abraham. The legalists always pointed to Moses and the law, so Paul goes back before Moses and points to the faith of Abraham. This is the beginning; this is where it all started.

The apostle quotes Gen. 15:6: "Then he [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The point is that Abraham did not live under law—in fact the law had not been given yet—but rather, Abraham believed God and that made him righteous and acceptable before God. By faith Abraham believed God when God declared to him that he would give him descendants, even though he and Sarah were aged and childless. By faith Abraham believed God when God told him that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. By faith Abraham believed God when God instructed him to sacrifice Isaac.

As a result, Abraham started a family, a heritage. This is what Abraham's name means, "father of multitudes." It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham, says Paul. The apostle is not referring to the physical family of Jews, but to a spiritual family. According to Paul, anyone who believes is a son of Abraham. Therefore, the Gentile believers, indeed any non-traditional religious people who live by faith, as Abra-

ham did, are declared righteous and they gain full acceptance before God. They are already in Abraham's family, thus they do not need to be circumcised; they do not need Jewish identity markers.

Paul then reviews the promise that was given to Abraham in Genesis 12, "All the Gentiles will be blessed in you" (Gen. 12:3). When God spoke these words, according to Paul, he was proclaiming the gospel before Christ came. And that gospel is that Gentiles, i.e. the non-religious, are pronounced righteous by faith.

As we will see in verses 10-14, this is a two-fold blessing, involving justification and the Spirit of promise. The principle is very clear: Righteousness, and its resulting freedom, come about by faith.

What does this word "righteousness" mean? It means that people can be justified, pronounced righteous, by believing, just as Abraham did. By faith we can become sons of Abraham and enter into this blessed family. Of course this would present a serious problem for Jews, because law had defined their history and tradition. They were the chosen people, the sons of Abraham. The thought that an uncircumcised Gentile could by faith find acceptability before God apart the law was a bitter pill for them to swallow.

But in the book of Galatians, the idea of righteousness has an even deeper significance. Righteousness has to do with what makes us acceptable, what makes us right, what qualifies us for approval. The reason we live under law is that we do not feel approved or accepted, so we think that if we can perform, if we can attain some level of acceptability, then we will be approved by God, our spouses, our parents—even ourselves. To be accepted and to be acceptable: this is what our hearts cry out for.

At our recent singles retreat, one young woman shared these very feelings in a poem:

You glance and see
but a shell of me
A pleasant smile and obnoxious chuckle
My costly diploma
My missions cheer
I listen, I speak; I even pray
What you hear
What you see
Just what the church ordered:
Sugar-coated Christian leader
Sunny-side up
Knows her Bible
Knows her doctrine
Easy to love

But if you look closer
Do you see
a fragile child
inside this Woman Warrior?
Never good enough

Never smart enough
Never able to please.

Each of us longs for this sense of righteousness and acceptability. Righteousness, freedom and faith are closely linked. Abraham, despite all his flaws, experienced this acceptance by faith.

So the beginning of freedom is believing what God says about us, not what we think about ourselves. Our approval must come by faith.

In verses 10-12, Paul states the corollary principle: righteousness does not come by law.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; as it is written, “Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.”

The fact that righteousness does not come by law was never God’s intention. Paul cites several OT texts to prove his point.

The problem with the law is this: whoever puts himself under law is under a curse. This is what Deuteronomy 27:26 says: “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” This text is saying that anyone who places himself under law is cursed because he has to perfectly obey the whole law, but he finds he is unable to do so.

The reference here to Deuteronomy, and the two words “blessing” and “curse,” bring to center-stage Deuteronomy 27-30, the text that talks about all the blessings that Israel would inherit if she kept the law, and all the curses she would inherit if she failed to keep the law. This section in Deuteronomy even anticipates that Israel would not keep the law and would incur judgment and exile. It even speaks of promises for her return and restoration. However, even though Israel returned from physical exile, the nation did not experience full restoration. They were still in exile under Roman rule; and they are still under the curse. So Paul may well be saying that if the Gentiles come under Torah, then they would join Israel, who was still under the curse of Deuteronomy.

Herein lies our problem, our difficulty in finding freedom. We need freedom not just from the law, but from the curse of the law. And the curse of the law is exile, being cut off from the convenental family. The result, says Paul, is that no one is justified by the law.

The apostle quotes two OT texts, one positive, one negative, to prove his point. First, positively, the way to life is this: “But the righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4). The only way to be righteous and experience eternal life is through faith. There is a tie here between righteousness and life. And second, negatively, the way to death: “The one doing them will live by them” (Lev.

18:5). If you try to achieve eternal life through the law, you must keep all of the law. But no one can do that. Therefore, the effect of the law is to condemn and kill.

So if our first principle is that righteousness comes by faith, our second is that righteousness does not come by law. We can never achieve salvation through our own efforts. But at a deeper level, this principle means that if we live legalistically, if we live under law we will not experience the blessings of Abraham, which are freedom, joy, and life.

When I put myself under law I inevitably experience not the blessing of the law that I hope for, but the curse of the law that I dread, since I cannot maintain obedience to the law. This is what the history of Israel teaches us. In modern language, the curse of the law is the separation from God that is caused by sin. It is the pain of failure, the agony of never being good enough, the weight of shame, guilt, and condemnation. The curse is the feeling that I do not measure up, and indeed cannot. The curse is feeling that I am somehow flawed, fatally marred, hopelessly abandoned. And further, the curse forces me to hide my deep sense of pain, shame and failure, because if I admit to it, I may well self-destruct.

At times, of course, we do believe that we are declared righteous by faith. We know this principle to be true. However, we do not believe the second principle, especially when we consider how we live. We do not believe that righteousness cannot come by law. We still hope that we can do it, we can cut it, we can achieve righteousness through a series of laws that we impose upon ourselves or someone imposes on us.

Oftentimes when we feel the curse of the law, or see the consequences of disobedience, we respond by redoubling our efforts. We mistakenly think that if we try harder, our sense of shame will be removed, and the pain of rejection will be alleviated. But if guilt is motivating our actions, we are in danger of becoming the target of agitators and troublemakers who would seek to control our religious and social life, even our careers. Rather than finding freedom from the curse, we will become even more legalistic. We will try anything to remove the curse and find acceptance.

Paul says that when we act this way, our thinking is wrong. Law-keeping can never remove the curse of the law. No matter what we accomplish, law-keeping will never change the deep things of our hearts. Righteousness can never be earned, because the law is not of faith. It can never grant us the sense of righteousness and acceptability, the sense of approval that we seek. These things come only by faith: “The righteous man will live by faith.” If acceptability is dependent on performance, then we will never feel approved.

What are the things you do to try and remove the curse from your life? Maybe you deny your inner feelings and block them out completely. One response I make is to try and impose a sense of order in everything I do. A sense of order is a good thing, but I can be very

legalistic about it. When I am frustrated, and feeling vulnerable, broken or inadequate, I immediately try to impose order on my life and my home. I think doing this will solve my frustration and give me peace and calm. However, the opposite is usually true, because I merely grow more frustrated through these legalistic actions.

So, what is to be done? How can we become free from the curse of the law? Paul tells us in verses 13-14:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Christ redeemed us, says Paul, from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Christ took upon himself the curse that we deserved, granting to us all the blessing that he deserved. He was able to accomplish this because he represented Israel: He put himself under law. In the crucifixion, he took upon himself Israel's curse and exhausted it.

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 for his supporting text: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Jesus died as the King of the Jews, at the hands of the Romans, whose oppression of Israel was the present and climactic form of the curse of exile itself. Christ did this so that Gentiles could receive the blessings of Abraham. So the Torah did not have the last word. This was the restoration of Deuteronomy 30 on the other side of exile. The blessing is entering into the family by faith, becoming a son of Abraham; it is the blessing is justification by faith (8) and the receiving the Holy Spirit (14)

Now our third principle is clear: Christ redeems us from the curse of the law. Every time I looked at this text during my studies last week I was overcome with emotion. These verses clearly say that we are justified by the death of Christ. But there is more: we are delivered from the curse—the curse of our disobedience, the death that is our due because of our sin. Christ offered himself so that we do not have to be card-carrying legalists. He died to remove this curse from us and permit us to enter into the blessings of Abraham. We receive the Spirit, and the Spirit replaces law. Through Christ we

are set free from anything or anyone that would play upon our need for acceptability and righteousness.

What do we do with the sting, the pain of the curse of law? What do we do with our sense of never being good enough for God to love us? What do we do with the despair of not becoming what our parents wanted us to be? How do we deal with the disappointment of not living up to what we expected of ourselves? What do we do with the sense of shame that comes from doing some dark deed that we never thought we were capable of doing? How do we deal with the guilt of knowing that we have disobeyed God?

The answer to these questions is this: we must come to the cross. There, at the cross, “Christ became a curse for us.” Law cannot deal with these things. God does not say, “Fine. Believe, and I will accept you.” We deserve the curse, we deserve the death penalty, just as much as anyone on death row. Rather, God says, “I accept you, because Christ became a curse for you.” Christ endured the death penalty that was due to us. Christ then becomes the object of our faith. If we believe in God's Son, we become God's sons and enter into the blessings of Abraham.

This then is the beginning of freedom, when we stop trying to please, appease, win over, manipulate, pretend, try harder. Keeping law cannot halt the treadmill of the curse of the law. The beginning of freedom is when we live by faith in Christ who became a curse for us. The beginning of freedom is when we go back to Abraham and realize our family heritage. We do not need law in order to enter into his family. As Gentiles, with no tradition, we can enter by faith into the blessings of Abraham. We can be justified by faith, and become partakers of the Spirit of promise, spiritual sons of God.

It is not law that defines us, but rather faith in the One who redeemed us from the curse of the Law.

As my friend wrote in her poem, expressing her inability to find righteousness in herself,

There is only One
Who can know me so broken
Who can love me so complete.

This is the beginning of freedom.

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