



THE DANGER OF LOSING OUR FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 978
Galatians 4:1-11
Eleventh Message
John Hanneman
December 4th, 1994

In our studies in the book of Galatians we are learning how to stop living under the law and begin living in Christian freedom. As we have already seen, living under law amounts to placing ourselves under the emotional control of someone or something. Living under law is being controlled by anything other than the Holy Spirit. But Christians are separated from the world and its controls. No matter what the circumstances, Christians should not be driven by guilt, the need for approval, or the desire for identity. In order to experience this kind of freedom we need to appropriate the new identity which God gives to us when we become Christians. If we do not understand this new identity that is ours in Christ, and live in it, then we are in danger of losing our freedom.

In our text today, Paul goes on to talk about these two identities and the danger of getting them confused. Galatians 4:1-11:

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, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were 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 your hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

However, at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Gal 4:1-11, NASB)

In these verses Paul talks about three categories of people: a child, a slave, and a son. Typically, a child is immature and vulnerable. He is under guardians and managers. He needs protection and patronizing. In Ephesians, Paul talks about children who are tossed to and fro by changing doctrines. In 1 Corinthians, he counsels setting aside immature and childish things.

The second category is slaves. In that first century day, a slave lived in fear for his life. He possessed no rights. A master could torture, kill, shame, and humiliate his slave without fear of interference. A slave could not represent himself in a legal action, and he was subject to seizure and arrest. Freedom to choose his activities was denied to him. In Romans 8:15, Paul says that the spirit of slavery is fear.

The third category is that of son/lord/heir. An adult son is master or lord of everything. He shares the responsibilities of the father, and has the same perspective as his father towards the home and family. Under Roman law the son was an heir, and he had legal standing as such even during his father's life. It was birth, not death, that made one an heir under Roman law. Thus "heir" and "son" here are closely connected. After a son had succeeded to the inheritance as the representative of the father, undertaking all the duties and obligations of his father, he became an heir.

According to Paul, a child is no different from a slave even though he is lord of all. Even though he is an heir by promise, he is not yet so in experience, because he still is a child. As such he is under guardians and stewards who protect and guide him until the appointed day when his father bestows upon him the identity of son, and grants the inheritance.

Paul applies this analogy of a child and slave both to the Jew and the Gentile who live under law. First, he applies it to the Jews, using the pronoun "we," in verse 3. Paul says, in effect, that the Jew is like the child, and the law, the Torah, is like a guardian or steward, similar to the tutor of chapter 3. A Jew who has the promises of God cannot experience these promises as long as he is a child living under guardians and managers, i.e. living under law. A Jew, therefore, is no different from a slave even though he has all the heritage of the Old Testament.

Paul also says that the Jew was "held in bondage under the elemental things of the world." While this phrase could be referring to the idea of first principles, things like the letters of the alphabet, here I think Paul is referring to the elementary elements of the universe, physical elements such as earth, fire, air and water, or heavenly bodies, the sun, moon and stars. These things represent idolatry and the world, which is controlled by evil powers. In verse 3, Paul is relating the elemental things of the world to the law. As long as a Jew is under law then he is like a slave to the rudimentary things.

Thus the primary identity of a Jew who lives under law is that of a child.

Paul also applies this analogy to Gentiles, changing the pronoun from “we” to “you.” Again he uses the same idea of being enslaved to elemental things, referring to the time when the Galatians were slaves to those things which by nature are not gods. Again the sense of elemental things has to do with idolatry, false worship, demonic control, the powers of this world. Paul is saying that prior to their coming to Christ, the Galatians were slaves; that was their primary identity.

It is fascinating that Paul applies this term “elemental things” both to the Jew under law, in verse 3, and the Gentiles enslaved in pagan idolatry, in verse 8. The control factors and the dynamics are identical. What this means is that both Gentiles and Jews, religious and non-religious, Christians and pagans, have the same problem of living under the law, whether it be the Mosaic Law, a self-imposed law, or societal laws. The dynamics and emotions of living under law are the same in all cases. Thus a person can live under law whether he grows up in the church or in a totally pagan environment.

The law can come into play in the number of Bible meetings one must attend in order to be accepted as a Christian, or things we are obligated to do around the house in order to be an acceptable wife or husband. Either way, the flesh responds to the law and attempts to perform and be seen as perfect. And as long as we are motivated by a sense of guilt, derive our identity based on performance, or gain approval through external achievements, we are under law. One may be a child with the promise of being an heir, the other may be a slave, but the experience of being under law is identical. Legalism leads to slavery, to a life that is controlled or controlling, a life that is not free.

So in Paul’s analogy, the roles of child and slave describe our identity prior to our becoming Christians, or prior to our living freely in Christ. Both words describe being under law. I can relate to both identities. For example, I can relate to being a child. As the “baby” in the family, I maintained that role for many years in my relationships with my parents and my brothers. Every time I went home for the holidays, for instance, I would slip right back into the role of a child. I would come down for breakfast and my mother would ask me whether I wanted bacon and eggs or pancakes. But when my wife came to breakfast, my mother would tell her she could fix herself cereal. If there was one piece of banana cream pie left, my mother would give it to me. As far as my older brothers were concerned, I could manipulate any situation in my favor simply by acting like a child. But a child is not free. He is enslaved. He is controlled and controlling. I can also relate to a slave identity. Even though I grew up in church, and had a good moral home, I did not become a Christian until after my college years. As a result I became enslaved to many things. I did not want to go to bed at night for fear I

might miss something.

So living under law is the story of my life. I know that many of you can relate with the child/slave identity, either from your past, or because of a sense of perfection that you are seeking, or your desire to gain approval. If we are going to be free in Christ, however, we have to change identities, for in Christ we have been given a glorious new identity.

That change came about because God did two miraculous things to give us a new identity; it was nothing we did. Verse 4: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were 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 your hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (4:4-6). The first thing that God did was to send forth his Son. God did this “when the fullness of time came.” The word “time” here refers to a distinct time in history as opposed to a season. This was the time set by the Father when the child should reach the proper age, when he would be freed from guardians and inherit the promise.

This Son who was sent forth was born of a woman. The woman’s name was Mary; the Son’s name was Jesus. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. John Stott writes, Not only was Jesus born of woman, “He was born ‘under the law’”; He was born to “a Jewish mother, into the Jewish nation, subject to the Jewish law. Throughout His life He submitted to all the requirements of the law. He succeeded where all others before and since have failed: He perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 106).

Jesus’ purpose in coming was two-fold. He came “in order that he might redeem those who were under Law.” Paul used this term earlier in 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.” This was a marketplace term, used to refer to the act of buying a slave out of bondage into freedom. We were bought out of the system that emphasized performing and achieving, and given freedom. And second, Jesus came “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Paul is referring to the ceremony whereby a child received a change in status from child to son/heir with all the rights and privileges of the father. Roman emperors used this sonship ceremony to adopt men other than blood relatives to succeed them in authority. After this ceremony, the new son was equal to any child born in the home. John Stott comments: “So the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ and the 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” (*Galatians*, 106).

But God did something else. After he “sent forth” his Son Jesus, he “sent forth the Spirit of His Son” (v. 6). The reason we have the Spirit is because we are sons. And the Spirit communicates with the Father, bringing us into intimacy with him. It is the Spirit who cries, “Abba! Father!” “Abba” is the same word that Jesus himself used in intimate prayer to God. Paul repeats the same truth in Romans 8:15-16: “you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

What Paul is saying here is that the primary role of the Spirit is to validate, authenticate and perpetuate our relationship as a son or daughter of God. Most of us don’t think of the Spirit in this way. We normally think of the Spirit in the context of spiritual gifts, manifestations of God working in our midst, revival, etc. The Spirit does work in these ways, but what Paul is saying is that first and foremost the Spirit, the Helper, the Comforter, is given in order that we might have intimacy as sons and daughters in our relationship with our heavenly Father. This is how we pray, this is how we listen, this is how we enjoy a true father/son relationship. We cannot enter into this relationship without the Spirit. But now we can address God as Father in the same way Jesus did. Eugene Peterson writes, “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 John Stott comments: “Paul says to us clearly that if we are God’s children, and because we are God’s children, God has sent His Spirit into our hearts. And the way He assures us of our sonship is not by some spectacular gift or sign, but by the quiet inward witness of the Spirit as we pray” (*Galatians*, 107).

God’s purpose was not only to secure our sonship by his Son, but to assure us of it by his Spirit. 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 his Spirit that we might have the experience of it.

The result then of God’s actions is that we no longer are slaves, but sons, and if sons, then heirs through God. Paul is saying that we have a whole new identity, that of sons of God. Because we are sons, and because we have the Spirit of the Son, we no longer have to be under law.

Sonship, then, is the relationship of freedom. Son is the identity of freedom; sonship is the key to freedom. We cannot repeat this too often. Sonship is the relationship with God that enables us to stop living under law and begin to experience freedom. This is the point of the entire middle section of Galatians, beginning with chapter 3 verse 6, all the way through chapter 4. Paul is attempting to prove through the OT that Christians, even Gentile Christians, are sons of Abraham, sons of promise, sons of God, and heirs with Christ. We are no longer slaves, we are no longer children, but sons of

God.

Basically, we are free because we have a new identity given to us by God, one that we could never get on our own, one that the law could never give us. The identity of legalism is child; the identity of paganism is slave; but the identity of the Christian is son.

It is fascinating to think that people understand this general principle very well and act on it, either consciously or unconsciously. The general principle is that a changed identity will give us what our hearts desire. We see this truth all around us. People read glamour magazines to have a model identity; study home magazines to gain a wealth identity; dress to have a sophisticated identity; go to health clubs to gain an athletic identity; attend the right schools to get the right degrees to have a career identity; work hard in a church to get a religious identity, and on and on. Now there is nothing wrong with looking good, dressing well, being fit, getting an education, or serving God. But when we look to a new identity to change the way we feel inside we become a slave or a child under the law.

Heathcliff, the brooding hero in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, sought to become a sophisticated man of the world in order to exact revenge on the people who had rejected him for his servant identity. In *The Great Gatsby*, the ill-fated Jay Gatsby worked his entire life to change his identity in order to gain the favor of the beautiful Daisy. In the classic western *Shane*, the hero tried to shed his identity as a gunfighter but failed. In a memorable line at the end of the story, Shane tells the little boy, Joey, “There ain’t no going back; you can’t break the mold.”

People everywhere are seeking a new identity in order to find freedom. Satan, of course, has this down to a science. But we are doomed to failure if we insist on going this route. All around us we see proof of this. The only identity that can really change our hearts and give us freedom is being a son or daughter of God. And we can never earn this; it is the gift of God given as a result of his promise.

It is God who changes our identity. God changed Abraham’s name to Abraham, Jacob’s name to Israel, and Simon’s name to Peter. I had a nickname in college that I didn’t really care for, but I could not rid myself of it. I am not going to tell you what that nickname was, but that name was my identity. But after I became a Christian that nickname faded, because God changed my identity.

So God gives us a new identity, that of a son of God. This is who we are, and this is the key to freedom.

But we are in danger of giving up our sonship and our identity of freedom and returning to our child or slave identity of living under the law. This is what happened to Peter, as we saw in chapter 2, and this is what happened to the foolish Galatians.

In verses 8-11, Paul expresses his concern: “However,

at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” Paul is asking how the Galatians could return to the bondage from which they had been freed. Why would they go back to living in slavery now that they had come to know God? The implication is that living under Jewish law is the same as being held in slavery to the elemental things of the world. And further, Paul describes the elemental things as weak and worthless. The law is weak because it has no power to redeem us, and it is poor or worthless because it has no wealth to bless us. What benefit do we derive from going back to it?

The issue, according to Paul, was “days and months and seasons and years.” This is a reference to the Torah, the Jewish identity markers. “Days” probably refers to the keeping of the Jewish Sabbath, and to festivals of a day’s length; “months” may refer to the new moons that governed the calendar; “seasons” to the special feasts of the Jews, such as Passover and Tabernacles; “years” to Jubilees and the beginning of the Jewish year. Paul expresses his fear, “lest somehow I have labored for you in vain.” Paul “fears that all the time and trouble he has spent over them has been wasted. Instead of growing in the liberty with which Christ had set them free, they have slipped back into the old bondage” (Stott, *Galatians*, 108).

The principle is that there is a real danger of our not experiencing and enjoying our new identity. If this is not a settled thing we can lose our freedom and we will live as children and slaves. We must get this right before we move into chapters 5 and 6, which deal with sin issues.

Why do we return so easily to the role of child or slave? As I reflected on this last week, a number of things came to mind. One reason we return to our old roles is that we so want approval we will do anything, even live under law, to get it. We will spare no effort to find it. We will live with guilt and perform with wrong motivation to gain it.

Second, it is hard to identify the ways we live under law and the things that control us. That is because our fleshly patterns are deeply ingrained. It is a very painful process to come to grips with the emotions that control

our lives, but if we are going to free, then we must be committed to honesty.

Third, it is easy to confuse the child/son identity because sonship is not an easy concept to grasp. It is difficult for us to connect with this truth at an emotional level. That has been my experience through a spiritual journey of 20 years. We have deep desires and longings; we want to be accepted and loved; we want to share intimacy. Most of us look to experience these things with our parents, siblings, spouses, or friends. But the notion that we are sons of God seems abstract to us. We don’t see this relationship as the solution to our need for love and acceptance. But the truth is that this is exactly what we are looking for. Our deepest need is to be regarded as a son or a daughter.

Finally, this process takes a long time. We begin our Christian lives as children under law. That is a good thing, because the law protects us and shows us the way. But most of us keep returning to our identity as a child or slave. We want to be sons, but we don’t know how to get there. We want to be free so much our heart aches. But this takes a long time and most of us don’t have much experience of it in our earthly relationships. My advice to you is to not worry about the length of time this takes. God uses all the events of our lives to reveal this truth to us. My encouragement to you is to rest and pray. Prayer is what will make that emotional connection. It is the Spirit who talks to the Father and leads us into intimacy with him, giving us assurance that we are sons and daughters. One thing is certain: God will be faithful to his promise, in his time. And once that promise possesses your heart you will never be the same.

Sonship is the identity of freedom. It gives us a sense of belonging, a sense of history, a sense of destiny. This is what we were meant to be from eternity past till eternity future. In the book of Romans, Paul says that all the creation is waiting eagerly for the revelation of you—the sons of God (Rom 8:19). In Christ you will be the centerpiece of the new heavens and the new earth, and you will know this truth in all its glory.

Here is how the writer of the ancient hymn put it:

*Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son,
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.*

Amen.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino