



PASSION FOR FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 4:12-20
Twelfth Message
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Have you ever been in a situation where you tried to save someone from disaster? You might have tried to stop a friend from doing something so stupid, selfish or naive it would have ruined their life. Perhaps it involved a friend who was in an unhealthy relationship; a family member who was thinking of joining a religious cult; or someone who was playing with fire. The danger in the situation was obvious for all to see, but the person involved was completely blind. This only served to heighten the sense of emotion and passion you felt to turn that person away from impending disaster.

The apostle Paul was involved in a situation with the church in Galatia that had the potential for disaster. The Galatian believers had been enjoying their salvation and freedom in Christ, who had redeemed them from the curse of the law, but they were being influenced by agitators and troublemakers to give up their freedom and to live under law, specifically to adopt Jewish identity markers. This generated a great deal of emotion and passion in Paul. Some might not regard legalism as something to get upset about, but Paul saw the potential for disaster for the very people who had received the benefits of his labor.

Today we come to a section of the book of Galatians that covers the apostle's personal relationship with the Galatian Christians. Paul rests from the argument that he has been making and makes a personal appeal to the believers there. This aside has wonderful insights into the heart and ministry of the apostle. He defines his passion for Christ and for Christian freedom, and sets out certain principles that lead to freedom in ministry.

Our text is chapter 4, verses 12-20:

I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth? They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them. But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (Gal 4:12-20, NASB)

I will make five observations from these verses, in line with the themes of passion and ministry as it was modeled

in the life of the apostle.

My first observation is this: The apostle maintains and communicates fond affection toward the Galatians in the midst of conflict.

Paul addresses the Galatians as “brethren” (v. 12), because they are fellow-sons of God through adoption; and he addresses them as “children” (v. 19), because he was their “mother,” the one who had given them spiritual birth. Notice the contrast between these affectionate terms and the term he used in 3:1, “O, foolish Galatians.”

And notice the apostle's desire: “I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you” (v. 20). Paul was very fond of these Galatian believers. They were his spiritual children. The apostle is not some uninvolved bystander; he is emotionally involved with his flock. For Paul, this was a heart issue, not a head issue. He may be frustrated and upset, but he is committed, loyal, and faithful to these people. He wants to see his spiritual children and change his tone from harshness to gentleness. He wants his grief, his sense of loss removed.

One who has a passion for freedom does not give up on people. Christian passion reflects a heart that responds towards people as if they were intimate family members. Spiritual shepherds, pastors and elders in particular, are not CEOs who look upon their flock as they would a profit/loss spread sheet. Rather they have a family fondness for the flock.

But sometimes we write people off when we are in conflict with them. If our advice or counsel is rejected, we take that rejection personally and respond in kind. But when someone's behavior determines our response, that is law mentality. It is saying, “If you do this, then I will do that.”

Paul, however, is an example of Christian passion and freedom. The behavior of the Galatians does not affect his feelings towards them. A free person is able to distinguish the difference between identity and behavior. Even though he will reject wrong theology or wrong behavior, he will not reject the person. The Christian who is truly free bases his life, relationships and ministry on promise, not on emotional slavery and co-dependency.

We see this kind of passion at times in a Bible study or prayer group when someone shares about a family member who is not a Christian or who has fallen into an unhealthy practice. No matter how deep the conflict may be, the concerned individual prays passionately both night and day that the loved one might avoid disaster or find salvation. A family member does not give up.

As Christians we are one in Christ. We are God's family, God's community, and as such we should maintain affec-

tion and fondness towards one another despite the fact that our behavior is not always excellent.

Here is my second observation: Paul, with a deep sense of urgency, begs the Galatians to become as he is. "I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are" (12). The apostle wanted the Galatians to be free in Christ even as he is. He had become like them when he lived with them, abandoning the Torah and living like a Gentile and now he wants them to be like him, free in Christ.

Here is how the apostle describes this principle of ministry in 1 Cor. 9:20-22:

And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.

People who are spiritually free, spiritual leaders in particular, maintain a passion for freedom. They long for others to be set free. They urge, exhort and appeal to their flock to experience these things just as Paul did with the Galatians. Their passion refuses to compromise on the seemingly trivial issues of legalism, but rather looks ahead and sees what will happen if someone submits to Christian identity markers to find approval as a valid, legitimate Christian. Just like Paul, such leaders will not sit in lofty places, but will be diligent to enter where people can be approached and understood. Freedom in ministry allows us to step out and enter into the world of others to urge them to be free. John Stott puts it this way: "In seeking to win other people for Christ, our end is to make them like us, while the means to that end is to make ourselves like them" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 113).

I think of Brennan Manning, a Catholic priest who ministers in the streets to the homeless and the alcoholics. I think of Mother Teresa, who has built her life on this principle articulated by Paul. I think of our own Jim Foster, ministering in Romania with a sense of urgency and appeal so that others might become free in Christ as he is.

I will always be in debt to one friend who acted in this way towards me. Steve became a Christian during our college years. He searched me out and entered into my world with a sense of urgency. After he appealed to me for a couple of years I, too, accepted Christ and became like my friend. I know that many of you also are blessed with this same kind of urgency and passion.

Our pastoral staff spends much time in staff meetings concerned about people. We pray for those who are wandering away from the faith; we labor for people to come to Christ. We care about the flock, and seek to be responsible to God's calling. We lie sleepless at night, praying that certain people will respond to truth. We pray over situations that are causing hurt and pain. In counseling we beseech people to respond to the truth. What we say may be rejected, but that doesn't matter; still we beseech, exhort and implore.

Do we find ourselves urging and pleading with people? This kind of passion is a sign of our own freedom in Christ.

Here is my third observation: Paul recounts his past history with the Galatians and urges them to remember the blessing of the relationship they experienced.

In Galatia, Paul was quite physically sick. Most certainly this was the reason he remained there. He may have had a chronic condition. Some think he caught an infection on his way to Galatia. Perhaps he contracted malaria in the mosquito-infested swamps of coastal Pamphylia, and so he headed north to the invigorating mountainous plateau of Galatia. Later we will learn that this illness affected the apostle's eyes; he may have suffered from ophthalmia. Whatever the illness was, this probably was the thorn in the flesh to which he refers in 2 Cor. 12:7.

Notice that the Galatians responded to Paul with total acceptance. That they did not reject him is obvious in the words "You did me no wrong" (12); "you did not despise nor disdain your trial in the flesh." The apostle's presence in Galatia meant great service and hardship for the Galatians, to the extent that he called his condition a trial for them, a temptation to which they could have responded with evil by rejecting him. Evidently, Paul's condition caused his appearance to be unseemly, even disfigured.

And notice the extent of their acceptance: "You received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (14); "if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" (15). The Galatians looked past Paul's physical appearance and saw Christ. They received the apostle as Christ himself. They would even have given him their own eyes. Paul was being totally vulnerable and weak, yet he was accepted—a sign of a healthy relationship. The result of this acceptance was that Paul took the opportunity to share the good news with them.

Some of the best times for ministry are when we are weakest; when we are limited in some capacity; when we are dependent on others to care for us or when we are forced to care for others. Passion in ministry makes itself evident despite the circumstances. Freedom does not worry about polished performances or orderly presentations. True spirituality is not success oriented, but occurs through God's leading and results in genuine relationships. Eugene Peterson comments: "Paul was spending time with them only because he wasn't able to be where he had wanted to go. Not only that, but his illness was a considerable inconvenience to them. He did not come as a strong, charismatic, glamorous leader with impressive credentials, offering sweeping, glorious solutions. He was weak and in need of their help. Paul didn't come among them and dazzle them with a sales pitch. He arrived and immediately fell apart; they had to nurse him back to health" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 129).

The result of what happened in Galatia as the Galatians cared for Paul is implied in the word "blessing." Paul asks, "Where is your blessing?" Evidently there was great love between Paul and the Galatians. Freedom in Christ had led to a tremendous blessing that had since diminished.

Eugene Peterson has an excellent word here:

Packed into the single word *satisfaction* is a vivid remin-

der: freedom does not come by getting control of things or people but by freely assenting to the reality of being, whether that being is a stranger's illness, or a crushing disappointment, or an incomprehensible failure, or a futile desolation. We discover the meaning of the free life in acts of compassion and loving service, not in running after people who make big promises to us. We realize the life of freedom in Christ by accepting pain and trouble and ailments, not in grabbing after the smooth solutions to life proposed by celebrities or experts. The moment of Paul's disabling illness and the Galatians' compassionate care was one of the glorious times in their lives: they knew freedom those days. They were hemmed in by necessities—Paul couldn't go where he had intended; the Galatians were pressed to tend to Paul's needs—and there resulted profound satisfaction. Freedom comes from trusting, not from manipulating, from leaving matters to God rather than trying to be in control (*Traveling Light*, 130).

A couple of years ago, a young woman who was involved in our singles ministry became seriously ill. For several days her life hung in the balance. Many of our young people responded by praying for her and visiting her in an outpouring of love that was marvelous to behold. When her parents came out to visit from the East Coast they were warmly embraced by everyone. Thankfully, she was restored to health. Her illness was the source of tremendous blessing for her and her family and for our entire community. This is the kind of blessing that Paul experienced with the Galatians.

The most effective ministry takes place through weakness. It is in this context that genuine freedom and passion yield blessings of joy and friendship that law can never yield.

My fourth observation is this: Paul questions his current relationship with the Galatians and exposes the false motives of the agitators and the troublemakers.

Paul asks two questions which reveal that his present relationship with the Galatians is quite the opposite of what it once was. His first question, "Where is your blessing?" is followed by, "Have I become your enemy?" Previously the Galatians saw Christ in Paul, but now the apostle has become the opposition. The reason for their hostile feelings is that Paul continues to speak truth to them even though they do not want to hear it. And not only that, the Galatians have a new loyalty to new teachers who have earmarked Paul as their enemy.

Notice what the apostle says about the troublemakers. First, concerning their false actions: "they are deeply concerned about you." But only on the surface, of course. The false teachers flattered and fussed over them, appearing to be caring and compassionate, but they were only manipulating them, leading them into their trap.

Second, notice the motive of the false teachers: "not commendably," is in contrast to what is "good" and "commendable" in verse 18. Paul wants the Galatians to remain loyal to him and his message even though he is not there.

And third, Paul exposes the true purpose of the false teachers: "they desire to exclude you in order that you might be deeply concerned about them." Their true purpose was to shut the Galatians out from freedom and advance their own selfish, ego-centered lives. The things that

purported to grant identity and freedom would have the effect of dragging them back into bondage. The goal of the agitators was to have a position of power over the Galatians, to replace freedom in Christ with bondage to them and the Torah.

What we see here is a classic dysfunctional relationship. The issue at stake in Galatia was control. The agitators wanted to control the Galatians by putting them under the law. In other words, they were seeking to dominate them emotionally, spiritually and physically. The sure sign of a false teacher is that he plays upon the weaknesses of others to gain control. The agitator manipulates a person's need for security and identity to gain control. The troublemaker leverages the strength of his personality against another to gain control. The result of this control is legalism—the false teacher takes the place of Christ in someone's life. The ultimate tragedy that legalism produces is that relationship with Christ is lost, replaced by loyalty to law or to someone who uses control as a mechanism to meet their own needs. All the joy, passion, adventure and blessing of the free life is obliterated, choked, bottled up. What is left is a duty-bound shell, with all feelings and pain and guilt locked inside. Sooner or later the person who succumbs to this will explode under the pressure of this control and his failure to be perfect.

This syndrome operates in many different arenas. Certainly we can see it at work in churches. Sadly, some church leaders see freedom as a threat. They feel it is their duty to control spirituality with law. They control the pulpit and feel threatened if someone else preaches. They attend every committee meeting to ensure that decisions go their way. But the result of this kind of leadership is that people end up living under law.

We can see this syndrome operate in the marketplace. Bosses use their positions of leadership to control the lives of others for their own personal gain or as a mechanism for their own fears. They are not concerned about those who work for them; their satisfaction in life is control.

All too often we find the same principle at work in the home. A spouse who strives to exercise control puts his or her mate under law. The motive is usually masked, but the real motive is personal gain, with the result that there is no joy or freedom in the relationship. Laws and rules are required in parenting, but parents can use good words ("I have your best interests in mind") to hide their selfish motives. Legalism is present when a parent's feelings about himself or herself depends on the child's performance. A child living in such an environment never develops freedom, but is driven to please his parents and feels responsible to make them happy. The book of Galatians actually lays a marvelous foundation for parenting.

In all these arenas the main issue is control. Control is the main ingredient in living under law and in false spirituality.

My fifth observation is this: Paul expresses the one true motive in relationships that gives freedom. His spiritual goal for the Galatians is that "Christ might be formed in you." The term "formed" is used in medicine for the formation of an embryo. Paul desires that they be born of God, conformed to the image of Christ. As the apostle writes the letter he is in labor, suffering birth pangs. He agonizes over the Galatians in the same way that a mother la-

bors to give birth to a child. He has a deep and sacrificial love for the Galatians.

And notice that Paul is in labor “again.” It is as if a miscarriage had occurred, and now he is trying to give birth to new life and freedom once again as he did during the conversion of the Galatians. “He is not satisfied that Christ *dwells* in them; he longs to see Christ *formed* in them, to see them transformed into the image of Christ” (Stott, *Galatians*, 116).

What a contrast to the goal of the false teachers who sought to dominate the Galatians for their own prestige and position. Paul, in contrast, wanted them be like Christ, and he would gladly sacrifice himself to that end.

There is great freedom in ministry and in relationships when our goal for people’s lives is that Christ be formed in them. Ultimately, this is the right passion to have for others. It is the kind of passion that allows for freedom to replace control. Control is concerned with what the external looks like, but freedom is more interested in what is being formed inside. Living under law or putting others under law never results in the formation of Christ within. Christ-likeness can never be forced, manipulated, or computerized. The only thing that can produce this is the Spirit of God. This is why law is totally ineffective in eradicating sin. It keeps sin in check, but it doesn’t deal with the root of the problem.

Again, we must apply this truth to the church. A true spiritual leader is not one who wants to control people’s lives; who gains his or her sense of self-worth by helping others; who is motivated by winning people’s approval; or who attempts to get everyone in the church looking just right. A true leader is one who labors and struggles to see Christ formed in the lives of those who have been born of God. Sadly, many leaders try to make their flocks seem perfect rather than free. Their efforts center on getting everyone to look like the law in Deuteronomy rather than the Christ in the gospels. What a far cry from John Calvin, who said, “If ministers wish to do any good, let them labor to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers.”

We can also apply this truth to parenting. Laws and rules are required to protect and guide children, but there comes a time when these kinds of controls must be relaxed. Children become sons and daughters, and in turn they become responsible to God for their lives. The parents’ roles as guardians and tutors come to an end, replaced by the desire for Christ to be formed in their offspring. Laws and efforts designed to control will never allow this to happen. When our goal for our children is that they have a life independent of us so that they can deal with God directly, then our relationship with them becomes free. This is always an individual matter, of course. Letting go is difficult, and it involves risk, but this is always the proper goal for a parent.

We have great freedom in ministry and in relationships when our desire is for Christ to be formed in the lives of others.

Our text highlights five observations about freedom in ministry and Christian passion for the spiritual well being of others. From these verses it is obvious that Paul was passionately involved with his spiritual children. In his dealings with them he had a sense of family, a sense of urgency, a hunger for joy, a desire for freedom, and a passion for Christ. What are your passions? What gets you excited? What motivates you in ministry? What drives your relationships?

Living under the law stifles passion, joy and creativity. If we are living under law we are living fearful, controlled lives; we are afraid to be different. But freedom magnifies our passions. When we are free we cry, laugh, beseech, agonize, suffer birth pangs and take chances. All of these emotions are expressions of freedom because we are not using them to control others. When we experience freedom in Christ we have a passion for freedom, not for perfection, a passion for oneness, not superiority. We experience passion in weakness, not in strength. We have a passion for grace, not law. And ultimately, our passion is Christ and him alone to be formed in our lives and in the lives of others.

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