



CHOOSING FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 5:1-12
Fourteenth Message
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Freedom from living under law is the subject of our study in the book of Galatians. I began my study in this book three years ago, and I found in its timeworn pages the story of my life, as God's word pierced through the iron walls of my protected heart. The piercing sword at first caused much pain, but soon the voice of God and the embrace of the Father comforted my weary soul. Ever since, I have been enjoying a freedom in Christ I never knew existed. So I return to our studies in this book with great anticipation. I cherish working through this text with you. I am grateful to the elders for giving me the opportunity to risk being honest; I am thankful to you for being a body in which I can become free; and I thank my wife for being patient with me and for being the kind of person with whom I can work out my Christian freedom.

Let us begin by reviewing the two major themes of Galatians. According to Paul, the major threat to Christian freedom is the law, i.e. living under the law, or to put it more technically, the "curse of the law." The Galatians were Gentile believers who were being influenced by Jewish teachers to live according to the Torah, i.e. to practice the rite of circumcision, observe holy days, eat the proper foods, etc. The reason the seductive influence of the teachers was so successful was that they offered identity, status, approval and acceptability to these Christians. The effect on the Galatians was a religion that resulted in a relationship with God that was defined by performance and rules—Christ plus works, in other words.

As we have already seen, the core issue of living under the law is control. And control can be manifested in many different relationships—our relationship with God certainly, but also our relationships with fellow Christians, spouses, employers, parents, and children. When we perform in a certain way in order to gain a sense of approval or identity, we are living under law. It makes no difference whether one is a Jew living under Torah, a Christian living under church rules, or a pagan living in idolatry, the dynamics of living under law are the same in every case.

The second major theme of Galatians is that the key to freedom is sonship, i.e. believing and experiencing the stature that is ours as sons of God. Paul spends the major portion of his book, from verse 7 of chapter 2 through all of chapter 4, making this point. According to the apostle, it is not Jews who are sons of God because of physical descent, but rather believers in Christ.

The purpose of the law is not to justify us, but to prove us failures. As a matter of fact, the law guarantees our failure. That is what God expects, because the law is designed to point us to Jesus. As Christians, therefore, we are no longer to regard ourselves as either children or slaves, roles which we were well familiar with before we came to Christ. Now that we are in Christ we are the spiritual seed of Abraham, sons of God, and heirs of the promise. We are one in Christ, new creations. And, most importantly, once we believe that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law we no longer are forced to prove ourselves, our worth or our acceptability through the law.

Now that we are sons of God, we too can hear the voice of God saying to us, "You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased." Like the father of the prodigal son, as our heavenly Father sees us returning, he hikes up his skirts and runs to greet us. He gives us his robe, his ring, a new pair of shoes, and throws a party for us. In this context, freedom and sonship are interchangeable words. The fact that we are free means that we are sons, and being sons means that we are free. This is a new experience for us. As we have already pointed out, we understand the roles of a slave and a child, because these terms characterize our human relationships, but whether we are a prodigal who has run far away or an older son who has remained at home and been obedient, God wants us to become his sons and daughters.

Sometimes the journey to sonship is a long and painful one. Perhaps you can relate to these words of Henri Nouwen:

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by him?' The question is not 'How am I to know God?' but 'How am I to let myself be known by God?' And, finally, the question is not 'How am I to love God?' but 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?' God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home...

It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 106).

The status of being a son, therefore, is the beginning of the Christian's free relationship with God. This is where we have come in our studies thus far.

But the book of Galatians does not end here. Once we recognize our freedom, then we are faced with purpose and responsibility: we must work out of this freedom in all of our relationships. First, however, Paul alerts us to the fact that we might have to fight to maintain our freedom. Look at what he says in verse 1 of chapter 5, where we take up our studies once more:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1, NASB)

Here the apostle sums up everything he has said to date, and makes the transition to what he wants to relate in the remainder of this letter.

He begins by making an assertion: "Christ set us free for freedom" (1a). Notice the double pronouncement of freedom, Paul states this truth, using both verb and noun. He is not referring to freedom from sin, but rather freedom from the law. Christ has set us free so that we might experience free lives and free relationships. Previously, when we were under law, we were controlled slaves, but now we have been emancipated by Jesus our liberator.

Then the apostle makes an exhortation to us to remain free (1b). First, he states this positively: we must "stand firm" in this gift of freedom. In other letters Paul gives this same exhortation to "stand firm": in the faith (1 Cor. 16:13); in the Lord (Phil. 4:1, 1 Thess. 3:8); in one spirit (Phil. 4:1).

Then, stating this negatively, Paul says, "do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." This word "subject" means "to be loaded down." The picture is of an ox which is bowed down by a heavy yoke. Thus the law is likened to a heavy burden, the weight of trying to be perfect; the endless effort required in order to be approved; the worry of being rejected; the guilt brought on by fear of failure. But, once we have been freed from this crushing yoke, the weight has been lifted and we are able to stand erect (Lev. 26:13).

Paul is making the point that once we are freed by Christ there is still a danger that we will not experience that freedom or that we can lose it. Freedom is an exhilarating but an unfamiliar feeling. We are unpracticed in it. We are unaware of and unalert to the many ways in which it may be lost. We are prone to letting the heavy yoke be placed back on our shoulders. For example, we can be seduced by any number of different voices. Religious leaders may charge that we are not living up to the "real" Christian standard; the world tells

us we are worthless; friends tell us we disappoint them; parents say they will love us if we do better; spouses point out our faults and withhold their affection. When we hear these voices, we immediately are tempted to engage the work-ethic engine that insists, "I can do it, I can do it. I think I can, I think I can." We put our necks back in the yoke and try to earn approval through performance, placing ourselves under law once more.

The apostle says that is a real and present danger and we have to choose to stand firm and resist it. We must be willing to fight. We must not buy the notion that we have to win acceptance with God or anyone else by means of our own performance. We must remind ourselves daily that Christ has set us free for freedom; that we are sons and daughters of the living God. Eugene Peterson warns: "[Freedom] is not something that can be put in a bank vault and kept safe. It is not a privilege conferred, like an academic degree, that certifies access to privileges and honors. Each day we must take up the stance of freedom again" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 145). So the difficult choice to live freely must be made over and over again. The patterns of legalism run deep. It is hard to shrug off the control of others. The applause of the world is seductive.

Are there aids that will help us to choose freedom? Let me suggest four, based on what the apostle says in verses 2-12.

Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace (5:2-4).

First, Paul says that living under the law disconnects us from Christ and sonship. "Christ will be of no benefit to you," says the apostle. "Benefit" means help, aid, to be of use. Paul's reasoning is that Christ is of no use if we live under law, because once we submit to circumcision as a way of being approved by God (saved by works, repeated twice), then we are in debt to keep the whole Torah. If this is how Christians live, according to Paul, "You have been severed from Christ." "Severed" means make ineffective, powerless, idle. When the word is used of relationships, it means to be estranged, released from association with someone. For example, the death of a spouse severs the marriage relationship.

And, says the apostle, "You have fallen from grace." "Fallen" is a nautical term that means to drift off course, to run aground. (The word is also used of withered flowers that fall to the ground.) Perhaps I can illustrate. Imagine that you are married and that your spouse loves you unconditionally. Nothing you do affects the way your spouse feels about you; nothing will enhance or diminish those feelings. But there is a problem: You are completely unaware that this is how your spouse

feels about you, and someone has convinced you that you have to work hard and perform in a certain way in order to be accepted and loved by your spouse. So you are never free to enjoy their love. You feel guilty all the time for not being “good enough.” What a tragedy that would be!

But this is what can actually happen in our relationship with God if we allow ourselves to be placed under law. God loves us very much, but at times we are seduced into thinking that he expects certain things from us in return. Imagine how sad God must feel when we trade Christ for living under law. Living under grace as sons of God is Christ-centered; living under law is self-centered. Living under grace involves relationship with the living Christ; living under law destroys that relationship. Living under grace allows Christ to supply our needs and grant us his resources; living under law shuts down those channels and puts all the burden on us. If this is how we insist on living, Christ is of no benefit to us. We will not enjoy or experience his blessing, and Christ will have died needlessly.

Here is how John Stott puts this:

To add circumcision is to lose Christ, to seek to be justified by the law is to fall from grace. You cannot have it both ways. It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby acknowledging that you cannot save yourself, and then receive circumcision, thereby claiming that you can. You have got to choose between a religion of law and a religion of grace, between Christ and circumcision. You cannot add circumcision (or anything else, for that matter) to Christ as necessary to salvation, because Christ is sufficient for salvation in Himself. If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ. Salvation is in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 133-134).

Secondly, the apostle says that living under the law sets our hope on ourselves rather than God.

For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love (5:5-6).

Notice here that Paul switches pronouns from “you” to “we.” He is referring to both himself and all believers in Christ as they await the hope of righteousness. When we live under law, we are under the impression that our efforts count for something; they will profit us. As a result, our hope for life, approval and love depends totally on ourselves and on our performance. But that is a formula for failure. It is a futile hope. We cannot do it. Living under the law imprisons us on a treadmill that demands achievement in every one of our relationships. Our hope can never be realized. To put this in modern terms, living under the law is like putting all our hopes on winning the lottery, or on the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series—or hoping there will even be a World Series!

But Christians have a very real hope, what the Scripture calls the “hope of righteousness.” That hope is founded on the fact that God in Christ has already done everything to make us approved, accepted and valuable. He has conferred upon us the status of sonship and clothed us in his best robes. No longer do we have to be laden with guilt and feelings of worthlessness. We stand completely accepted in God’s presence. He likes us. He loves us. We do not need to feel ashamed. Our identity, our worth, our hope for heaven and glory are given to us as gifts which do not need to be earned or striven for. This is an inexplicable, miraculous thing, but this is what Scripture teaches and that is what we must believe by faith. Our hope is fixed in the love of the Father and the work of the Son. The Spirit replaces Torah. Faith replaces works. Circumcision or uncircumcision, therefore, mean nothing.

The third reason why we should choose freedom over legalism is that living under law will result in our following the wrong leaders.

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished (5:7-11).

If we live under law, we will follow leaders who will control us and put us under even more law. Our relationships will be influenced and controlled in an extremely unhealthy way. Paul warns that such leaders are not the kind of people we should want to follow; they do not have our best interests, or God’s, in mind.

The apostle says two things about these kinds of leaders. First, their nature is disruptive; they trouble and disturb people (10, 12). They agitate and shake things up; they upset and unsettle; they put people on edge. They don’t produce rest and peace, because they are not resting in the finished work of Christ. Second, their influence is a hindrance: “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?” asks Paul. In other places the apostle likened the Christian life to a foot race. But legalistic leaders throw obstacles on the track that cause us to deviate from the path. And it doesn’t take much for this to happen: “a little leaven leavens the whole lump,” says Paul. An entire congregation can be led astray and thrown into upheaval by just a couple of agitators and troublemakers.

Further, their message is not from God: “not from Him who calls you,” says Paul. Their message is inconsistent with the Galatians’ call. And their destiny is judgment: “they will bear his judgment, whoever he is.” Why would anybody want to end up in the same place as these men? Paul trusts the Lord for the security of the

Galatians, and he is confident that the agitators will get what they deserve.

Their method, says the apostle, is slander and avoidance of the cross. They lied about Paul, saying that he was proclaiming circumcision, but the apostle points out the absurdity of this statement, saying he is still being persecuted for the message of the cross. The agitators were preaching circumcision, a message that was not offensive, and a belief that avoided persecution. But Paul was preaching Christ crucified, a message that was offensive and unpopular, and a belief that resulted in persecution and suffering.

Paul is saying that in order to stand firm in our Christian freedom we must always evaluate the kind of leaders we are following. Are we being controlled by relationships that hinder us from experiencing the free life of Christ? If we are, then we must test these leaders in the light of Paul's word. Then we will have to admit that they are taking us farther away from a life of freedom and true spirituality. Peterson writes, "The gravest threats to the free life do not come from the atheist or the secularist. They come from the quarter we might least suspect—from religion, particularly a former religion, a childhood religion, a neurotic religion" (*Traveling Light*, 143).

Fourth, Paul says that living under law grieves and angers the God who has set us free. Verse 12:

Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves (5:12).

The apostle is saying that if the agitators were so determined to have people circumcised, then they should go further: they should take the knife and castrate themselves. This was the practice of the priests of the heathen goddess Cybele, in Asia Minor. The harshness of this statement takes us back to chapter 1 where Paul says, "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (1:9). Why is he so harsh, saying that the agitators should "mutilate themselves"? It is because sonship and freedom are such wonderful blessings that anyone who would keep Christians from enjoying them by putting them under law should be damned.

Living under law grieves and angers God. The Father reaches out to us and beckons us to enter into a promise relationship with him, based on what he has done for us. We can only imagine his grief when he cannot enjoy us, and his anger at those who would keep us from him. He wants us to rejoice in our relationship of freedom with him, but legalism keeps us from hearing his voice saying to us, "You are my beloved son."

One week ago today, our singles group gathered on a beach in the Yucatan Peninsula, in Mexico. We had enjoyed a week's work of construction, witnessing, vacation Bible schools, and women's studies. Now we were gathered to hear the stories of six people and to witness their baptism. The day was glorious, but the stories were more glorious by far. We heard remarkable accounts of salvation and of the relentless love of God. I was overwhelmed with a sense of what God was doing among us. There was joy, freedom, and wonder. I thought to myself, God must be smiling, God must be saying to his Son, "We did that."

We are foolish if we think that we can do anything to top what God has already done for us in Christ. Why would we want to choose to live under law? If we insist on doing so, we will cease enjoying the beauty and freedom of our relationship with Christ. We will have a futile hope, based on performance; we will end up following the wrong people into judgment; and we will completely miss the glory of God here on earth.

Freedom is a choice that each of us is personally responsible to make. Others cannot choose for us. We cannot manipulate circumstances to our liking. Some people have no intention of controlling our lives, but they do so nonetheless. We can't blame them, whether they are pastors, fellow-Christians, parents, spouses, children, or co-workers. And we can't pin our hopes on changing them, because they may never change. We can't exchange families or escape to another church. If we try to, the same dynamics of living under law will arise because the legalism, the cry for acceptability, love, or whatever, lies within us. And that is where God wants us to be free—inside. So we must take on responsibility for living free lives. "Christ has set us free!" Freedom has already been accomplished. The choice we face is to stand firm in it and glory in it today and every day of our lives.

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