



## DYING TO BE FREE

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 986S  
Galatians 6:11-18  
Twentieth Message  
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June 11th, 1995

I have done much reflecting over the weekend as one season in my life has drawn to a close. These last few days mark the end of two major events: my daughter's graduation from high school, and this morning I am about to conclude my series on freedom from the book of Galatians. I can start thinking about retirement now! Someone said that life begins when the dog dies and the kids leave home. Following the graduation ceremony, I can believe part of that at least.

I began my studies in this great epistle three years ago. As we complete the series today, I can't help but think that I have just scratched the surface of Paul's argument. I am grateful to be part of a church that allowed me the opportunity to work out my freedom in Christ. I am grateful too to my wife for hanging in there with me through the past three years. I would have never survived without my "steel magnolia."

No truth has had so great an impact on my life as the principles which the apostle Paul sets out in this book. I hope they have had an impact on your lives as well. I want to begin by reviewing seven key principles that we have learned thus far:

1. Living under law (legalism) is manifested in many different relationships and in many different ways (relationships with God, church, marriage, work, exercise, school, parenting, etc.). But the core issue is always control (Gal. 4:17; 6:13), whether one is a Jew living under Torah, a Christian living under church rules, or a pagan living in idolatry (Gal. 4:1-10).

2. People are susceptible to living under law because they want to gain identity, acceptance, and approval.

3. Certain people or circumstances will always be a threat to our freedom, and will seek to control both our emotions and our relationships (Gal. 2:1-14).

4. The Law was never meant to grant freedom; it was given to show our failure and our inability to live up to God's perfect standard. And God knew that we would fail. He never intended us to become perfect through obedience to the Law. The Law was not the end; it was given to lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:15-24), who redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13).

5. The key to freedom is our status of sonship, i.e. in our believing that in Christ we are sons of God, not children or slaves (Gal. 3:26-4:7; the story of the prodigal son). The difficulty we have with our status as sons stems from our former experiences of being children and slaves. The meaning of sonship is that we live in a "promise" relationship with God, one based solely on God's promise, not our own efforts (Gal. 4:21-31).

6. The goal of freedom is not to indulge the flesh, but to truly fulfill Torah by loving one another. However, Spirit now replaces Torah (Gal. 5:13-16).

7. The manifestation of freedom is relationships that are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, rather than the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:15-26).

There is one more crucial element to add to this list of principles, as we will see this morning in Paul's conclusion to his letter. Verse 11 of chapter 6:

**See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.**

Paul has been dictating this letter to an amanuensis, but now, as was his custom, he takes the pen from his secretary's hand and adds a personal postscript. He writes in large letters, perhaps due to his bad eyesight, a condition which he wrote about in chapter 4, referring to his first visit to the Galatians. (Then, they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him.) Although Paul usually added a signature or a salutation to his letters, on this occasion he writes several sentences. The length of the ending indicates Paul's emotional involvement with and his concern for the Christian community in Galatia.

So, writing with his own hand, Paul now makes one last comparison between legalism and freedom, between the agitators and himself. This last comparison is critical, because it centers on the cross of Jesus. First, he describes how the agitators felt about the cross, in verses 12-13:

**Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh.**

These troublemakers were seeking to impose Jewish identity markers, things like circumcision, food laws, holy days, etc., on this group of Gentile believers. The Galatians were susceptible to being placed under Jewish law because these identity markers offered acceptance and standing. The erroneous theology that was being preached by the agitators was the same as that referred to in Acts 15: "Unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Once again, control is the primary issue involved in living under law. The agitators were seeking to compel the brethren to be circumcised, a word we have already seen twice in this book (2:3, 14). The basic problem, of course, was that the agitators did not want to embrace the cross of Christ, which they considered a scandal.

Here the apostle reveals some important characteristics of living under law. First, living under the law is to be concerned only with externals. The agitators wanted to "make a good showing in the flesh." Circumcision is something that is done to the body, the "flesh," of course, and the agitators' only concern was external show, not internal reality. When we live under law, we are only concerned with a good showing—how we look and what other people think of us. We are seeking approval and acceptance from oth-

ers, with the result that we are easily controlled and manipulated emotionally, whether in the church or the home. And when we put others under law, we are concerned only with how they look. We don't care about what is going on in their inner person. This is why we attend a meeting we don't particularly feel we should go to: we go only to be seen by others. This is why some offer their services to the church—merely to look good and to find favor. When we are living under law, appearance, not reality, is everything.

Second, living under law is a convenient way to avoid the persecution that comes with identifying with the cross of Christ. The early Christians were persecuted for their faith, unlike the Jews, who escaped persecution, because Judaism was an accepted state religion. One of the main reasons people placed themselves under the safety of the Jewish religious umbrella, with its identity markers, therefore, was to avoid the persecution that came with the cross of Christ.

Have you noticed that the world embraces religious, moral, law-abiding people, but refuses to accept Christians who identify with the cross of Christ? As a matter of fact, much of the church acts the same way. Here is the reason behind this: the cross is an affront to man, because it attacks his pride. It is contrary to the way the world thinks and operates, because it declares that man cannot save himself. People who live under law have the false impression that what they do counts for salvation. They do not want to give up control, because they do not believe the full impact of the cross and God's way of salvation. At my daughter's graduation ceremony on Thursday night, everything that was said brought glory to man's accomplishments, past, present and future. That might be fitting for a graduation, but it is one hundred and eighty degrees off when it comes to salvation. John Stott has written: "Nothing in the history of the universe cuts us down to size like the cross. All of us have inflated views of ourselves, especially in self-righteousness, until we have visited a place called Calvary. It is there, at the foot of the cross, that we shrink to our true size" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 179).

So the world embraces every philosophy or religion, but not Christianity. If we say that we believe in the deity of a rock, or a guru, or if we worship certain animals, the world says, "Wonderful! You have found your way." But if we say that we believe in the crucified Jesus, and that he died on the cross for our sins, the world says, "How narrow and primitive!" and we come under fire. We can celebrate Christmas, but we cannot mention Christ. We may sing Christmas songs, but we can't put up nativity scenes. It is because the cross is an offense, a stumbling block. When we align ourselves with the cross, not legalism, we will face persecution and the world will hate us. If we live under law, however, that is an indicator that we still want the world to like us, and that we fear its rejection.

Third, when we live under law, we are not really keeping the law. The truth is, we can't. It is ironic to think that the false teachers did not keep the very law that they sought to impose on others. Their theology and the reality of their lives did not match up.

When we live under law, we are deceived to imagine that we are succeeding when we really are not. We are always falling short, but we pretend otherwise. We can't keep either the law that others impose on us or the law

that we impose on ourselves. We are so fearful of telling anybody that we can't make the grade, however, we expend a lot of energy keeping up a good front. This is why we think that if anyone really knew what was going on inside us, they would reject us. We think we would be kicked out of the church, that our spouse would leave us or that our friends would never talk to us again. This way of living is absolutely exhausting, and it does not work.

Fourth, we put other people under the law so that we might boast in their flesh. The false teachers derived their sense of worth by getting others to do their bidding and by controlling them. Their desire was to use others for selfish gain, in order that "they might boast in [their] flesh." Once again we see that control is the primary issue in living under law. We control others and put them under law in order to feel better about ourselves and to derive a sense of worth from their performance. We want to glory in their flesh, in other words.

This is why we place our children unduly under the law. Children need law in order to protect and train them, but when we force them to do something and try to be something solely because we ourselves will appear better in the eyes of others, then we are stepping over the boundary and controlling them in an unhealthy way. The same principle is true when we are critical of our spouses and we manipulate them to be something they are not. The same dynamic is at work when a church leader controls the congregation and takes pride in the size of the church or the number of programs the church is running. The flock may well be dying, but he uses them to boast in their flesh.

These then are all signs of living under the law: trying to look good; being concerned about finding the world's approval rather than identifying with the cross (even though doing so brings on rejection from the world); not really doing the things that we want others to do; and controlling others for our own selfish gain. The central issues are failing to believe that the cross of Christ is everything, and giving up on our own efforts to control and save ourselves. If we do not fully embrace the cross, we will always be under law and we will never be free.

Now, by contrast, the way of freedom takes a much different view of the cross, as we see in verses 14-17:

**But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.**

The apostle stands in direct contrast to the agitators: Paul boasts only in the cross. He does not try to control others. He does not take pride in external decorations of his faith. He understands and embraces the cross, because he knows that the cross is essential to freedom in Christ.

In these verses the apostle makes several points about the cross and freedom. First, he declares that the cross involves a painful and humiliating death. At the cross, Jesus took upon himself all of our sin and all of the curse of the law. But for the believer, the cross signifies more than the death of Christ; it also signifies the believer's own death. That is what Paul said in chapter 5: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and

desires" (5:24). This means that when Christ died, we died too. Somehow Christians are united with the death of Christ. As a result, we give up trying to control, save or keep our lives. Further, we cease trying to control our spouses, our children or fellow church members, and we are willing to humble ourselves and identify totally with God's way of salvation. We cannot boast in ourselves and the cross at the same time. If we truly want to be free, we have to come face to face with our own death.

But we don't like talking about death, especially our own. We find any mention of death painful, because we do not want to let go of this world or the hope that it might satisfy us; and we don't want to let go of the hope that parents, children and spouses will fulfill us. But if we want to become free, there is no other way. We must embrace the cross. We must be willing to die with Christ. Austin Farrer puts it this way: "In the eyes of God our dying is not simply negative, it is an immensely important and salutary thing; by living we become ourselves, by dying we become God's, if, that is, we know how to die, if we so die that everything we have become in our living is handed back to the God who gave us life for him to refashion and use according to his pleasure" (quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 190-191).

Paul so identified with the cross that he bore on his body the "brand-marks" of Jesus. This word comes from the word "stigmata," the term used in secular Greek for the branding of a slave to mark his status. Paul was a slave of Jesus; he had received his branding in his persecutions. The word was also used for religious tattooing. An adherent of a cult would have a mark tattooed on his body to signify that he belonged to a particular god or goddess. Perhaps Paul was claiming that persecution, not circumcision, was the authentic Christian "tattoo." Paul's brand-marks were probably the marks he received from being beaten and stoned, according to 2 Cor. 11:23-25.

As a Jew, Paul bore the mark of circumcision, the mark which the false teachers insisted upon, but he also had other marks that proved he belonged to Christ. He had not avoided the cross of Christ. As a result, he bore the marks of Christ. The cross not only means death, it also means continued persecution and rejection.

Second, the cross results in the Christian's total separation from the world. Paul says that through the cross "the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." He glories in the cross because through death, he has found the freedom to enter into a new world, a new kingdom. He realizes that he does not control the events of this world and this world no longer had control over him.

At the cross, Christians part company with the world; we are transported from this world. But living under law is a sign that we are unwilling to separate ourselves from the world, to let go of its love and approval. We so fear being rejected by the world we do not want to identify with the cross. We want to boast in our own accomplishments rather than Christ's. But when we are crucified with Christ, we enter a new dimension of living called eternal life. No longer are we controlled by the world, by people or by circumstances. No longer do we have to control others to derive our sense of worth from them. We no longer have to control our life, or fear death, because we have already died. This is freedom in the truest sense of the word: to be separated from the emotional dynamics and entan-

gements of this world.

This is very difficult to imagine, let alone explain. At some point each one of us has to face our own death; at some point each one of us will be separated from the world. The only question remaining is, to what will we be joined? The cross declares that as Christians, we have already died; we have already been separated from this world and united with God. This is not a slight modification of status, but an act of gigantic proportions. It cannot be compared to moving to another city, or a career change. The distance we have been separated from the world is not measurable in miles. This is why we have a hard time grasping our freedom, because it is difficult to visualize the new dimension in which Christ has placed us. The good news is that if we are willing to face our death now, we won't have to face it again in the future, because we have already been joined to the kingdom of God.

Third, the cross results in the greater reality of becoming a new creation. Paul says that "neither is circumcision anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." In Christ we die, but in Christ we are resurrected.

Circumcision and uncircumcision represent two ways of life, two ways of trying to find freedom. As we have seen on numerous occasions, circumcision is the Jewish way of trying to find God's approval through religious ritual and right living. Uncircumcision, on the other hand, was the Greek way of letting loose and pursuing happiness. These two ways of living continue to be presented today: the moralist would help us to please God by burdening us with rules, procedures and advice; the fun-loving, carefree spirit would release us to fulfill our human potential in whatever way we deem best. Society is split between these two approaches.

Eugene Peterson comments:

There are people who are seriously trying to live out moral ideals and responsibilities and enlisting others in their program (the circumcised). And there are people who are convinced that their first priority is to treat themselves to a good time (the uncircumcised). They both argue for freedom...[but] they both refuse to deal with death...They are desperate to hold on to life...They are not free to die because their own life is all they know and all they believe in. The one is anxiously and compulsively moral, the other frantically and obsessively happy...Neither is free (*Traveling Light*, 193).

The good news is that there is a third way, and that is by becoming a new creation in Christ. Christians have died with Christ, but as painful as that might be, we are separated from the world in order to become a new creation. We are born of the Spirit. We are no longer a flesh person, but a Spirit person.

Unlike the false teachers, Paul is not concerned about the outward sign, but rather, the internal reality. We die at the cross with Christ and we are resurrected with him as a new creation. Freedom does not come through morality or carefree living, but through dying. It is only through the gateway of death that we can experience freedom from the world and a relationship with God. The only thing that matters, therefore, is becoming a new creation in Christ.

Fourth, the result of embracing the cross is the blessings of God, in the words of Paul, "peace and mercy." Jesus took on the curse of the law in order that we might receive the blessing of God. Paul says that all who are in line with

this canon, this standard of the cross and the new creation, will be blessed with peace and mercy. Everyone who embraces the cross, not circumcision will join true Israel as the family of God, the spiritual seed of Abraham that Paul talked about in chapter 3. And everyone who embraces resurrection instead of uncircumcision will live in the heavenly Jerusalem that Paul referred to in chapter 4.

Here then is our final principle: The way to freedom is the way of the cross. If we are willing to pass through the doorway of our death, as painful as that may be, we will find glory, freedom and blessing on the other side—a new world, a new creation, peace and mercy. The ultimate freedom is the freedom to die. May our only boast, then, be in the cross of Christ.

Death has played a crucial part in my own journey to freedom. Three years ago, my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She underwent surgery, and shortly thereafter passed away. My father had already died, and so with my mother's passing, there was no longer a home for me in Nebraska. This was a hard death to endure. Ever since I had left home at 23, I had wanted to return. Over the years I had a tremendous ache in my heart associated with home and Nebraska. Perhaps it was something I had not received: sonship, a birthright, a sense of completeness. With the death of my mother came the death of my dream.

I grieved for a long time. Things did not turn out the way I had wanted. I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to die. It was too painful. But, it could not be avoided. And so, with the Lord gently bulldozing me, I passed through the cross. I passed through the door of death—my own death. I let go. But in Christ I found what he had found and what Paul had found: I found freedom. I was separated from the world. I had become a new creation. And when I passed through that door, I discovered that I was home. The ache that I felt for so long was removed. There I experienced the truth of these words of Henri Nouwen, "Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says: 'You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests'...It is the never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity and giving life and love whenever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 37-39).

This quote from Eugene Peterson has been a great help to me:

There is no freedom worthy of the name that is developed by avoiding difficult situations or unpleasant people. Freedom that matures out of a life of faith is not selective, does not pick and choose. It does not ignore the hard questions and recognize the easy ones. It embraces. It includes especially death: the death of our Lord, the death of our friends, our children, our parents, ourselves—and all the metaphorical deaths, little and large, in which we are severed from what we thought we could not do without, from what alone we thought could fulfill or complete us (*Traveling Light*, 192).

The freedom to die is the climax freedom...It is not until we are free to die that we are free to participate in the ultimate expression of God's freedom, resurrection

(191).

Jesus himself said it best: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

Paul's final word, a salutation of grace, is an appropriate conclusion to this great letter. Verse 18:

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.**

The apostle ends his letter just as he began it, with a word of grace. (Early on, he expressed his astonishment that the Galatians were so quickly deserting the God who had called them "by the grace of Christ" (1:6)). Indeed, this entire letter is dedicated to the theme of God's grace, his unmerited favor toward sinners.

These then are the three issues raised in the book of Galatians: the question of authority (chapters 1-2), the question of salvation (chapters 3-4), and the question of holiness (chapters 5-6). The grace of Christ is the answer to all three questions. The answer to the question of authority is Jesus Christ through the apostles; the answer to the question of salvation is Jesus Christ through his cross; the answer to the question of holiness is Jesus Christ through his Spirit. "So we have Christ through His apostles to teach us, Christ through His cross to save us and Christ through His Spirit to sanctify us" (John Stott, *Galatians*, 191).

During my studies in Galatians, I wrote these words some time ago:

I think a lot more now about dying. I have watched both of my parents pass away. I see quite evidently the deterioration of my own body. I think about how I would feel if I were lying in bed, preparing to see God and thinking about my life. I think to myself, what would it be like? And if there were anything that I could sense at that moment, what would it be? I know now that life does not end in nice neat packages. All the loose ends are not tied together. You pass from the earth without knowing the end of several stories. The conclusion I come to is that there is one thing I would like to experience, and that is freedom—freedom from regret, freedom from feeling bad about failing, freedom from feeling guilty, freedom from being under the law. And so that is what I pray for and hope for in this season of life, as I finish the course, as I prepare more and more for the hope of eternal life. I want so much to be free.

Today, I can say that our God is a God of grace who answers prayer. And today, by his grace, I can say that I boast in the cross of Christ.

Let us take a few moments now to reflect on the cross. Are you willing to die so that you might be free? Are you willing to follow Jesus to the cross? Are there things that God is asking you to die to today? Then press on and pass through that door. Perhaps you have never come to the cross and embraced Jesus. I invite you to do so now. I cannot say you will be successful in this world, but I can say that you will have freedom and joy in the kingdom to come.

Amen.

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