



# WHAT IS FREEDOM?

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 968

Galatians 1:1-5

First Message

John Hanneman

June 12th, 1994

I began to study the book of Galatians almost by accident two years ago when I was on sabbatical. As part of my sabbatical, I took a class on the parables of Jesus, taught by Eugene Peterson, in Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. While I was there, I decided to take a class, taught by Gordon Fee, on the book of Galatians. I had never done an in-depth study of Galatians. I knew that it had a lot to say about religious legalism, but I didn't think that would apply much to me, since I would not have characterized my life then as one of religious do's and don'ts. I thought the class might be academic, perhaps even boring, but I felt it might be helpful for teaching others who struggled with legalism. I was greatly mistaken. In the book of Galatians I discovered the story of my life. As I became more familiar with the text, I experienced much joy, but also much pain as I encountered the living God revealed in his living word. No book of the Bible has had a bigger impact on me as a Christian.

I feel that the message of Galatians is what we most need to hear in the church today. Not many among us would call themselves legalists, but, to use the phrase that Paul uses in Galatians, if we are "living under the law," then that is what we are — legalists. I have to plead, "Guilty!" here myself. I am a legalist, although prior to my studies in this book I never would have characterized myself as one.

Perhaps I can illustrate. I know that I am a legalist because, when I make a list, I can't rest until every item is checked off. I know I am a legalist because I have to start showing a video by 8 o'clock so I can get to bed by 10. I know I am a legalist because I have to eat all the food on my plate. I know I am legalist because I feel guilty for not returning a phone call. I know I am a legalist because I must see every display when I visit a museum. I know I am a legalist because I am concerned about what someone thinks of me when I miss a meeting. I know I am a legalist because I tend to put my children under the law and motivate them by guilt. I know I am a legalist because I put myself under law and try to meet its requirements through my own efforts. I know I am a legalist because I impose the law on others. In fact, I impose a higher standard on others than I do on myself.

Some of you can identify with my list. You are easily persuaded to conform to external standards, to laws, whether moral, ethical, or religious. You place your-

selves under tremendous pressure, because you are being controlled by external factors. Living under the law is tantamount to being controlled by someone or something that tells us how to behave, so that external law defines and controls our behavior. Here is another way to state this: Living under the law is being controlled by anything other than the Spirit of God. Putting someone under law means that you are seeking to control them, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Legalism can come in many different guises, but the issue always is control.

The opposite of law, of course, is freedom. But what do we mean by freedom? Eugene Peterson has a word on how some people define freedom, which is not freedom at all: "Sometimes I want to be free the way my dog is free. I fantasize a dog's life because my dog is not subject to anxieties. But my dog is not free—she is a creature of instinct and reflex. It is not possible for her not to do most of what she does. The instincts are powerful within her, the conditioned reflexes thoroughly imposed upon her. And my leash is frequently there to restrain and guide her. It's a simple, happy life with many pleasures and delights. But it is not free" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 157).

Freedom means different things to different people. Today, we hear a lot about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from responsibilities, freedom from the fear of failure. The fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, which we just celebrated, brought before us one image of freedom. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," went the words of a popular song of the sixties. Freedom is hard to define, isn't it? But, when we talk about inner freedom, something deep inside of us resonates with affirmation. Yes, we want to be free. But something holds us back.

Inner freedom has to do with the very essence of our being. And this is the theme of the book of Galatians. The Greek words for freedom are used 36 times in the New Testament. Paul uses them 28 times in his letters, 10 times alone in Galatians. The purpose of this book is clear: it is to get Christians out from under the law and into freedom in Christ, to have Spirit replace Torah in our lives. Galatians reveals why we struggle so much with law. It identifies the key ingredient to becoming free, and how we can enjoy our freedom in Christ day in and day out.

As we begin our studies, I want to think through with you the meaning of freedom. For our text, we will take the opening five verses of Galatians.

**Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (Gal 1:1-5, NASB)**

The writer, Paul, describes himself an apostle, a “sent one.” Apostles were personally chosen, called and commissioned by Jesus Christ, and authorized to teach in his name. Notice that Paul is not alone. The letter comes from him and “all the brethren who are with me.” Paul was involved in community. Others shared the views expressed in his letter, although he was the only apostle among them.

Next, Paul makes a statement about his authority. He is an apostle “not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.” Paul’s authority was not in any sense inherited, learned, or passed down from man; it did not come from any human source. The apostle’s authority, says one writer, “is not a genetic endowment, but a divine assignment.” According to Paul, God had the credentials to grant such authority because he raised Jesus from the dead.

So at the outset Paul makes a forceful statement regarding his authority. There were some who sought to discredit his authority and his gospel. If he were not an apostle, men could, and no doubt would, reject it. This issue will take on added importance, as we will see later in the book.

The recipients of this letter were the “churches of Galatia,” referring to not one but several churches. A little background on the Galatians will be helpful. In the third century B.C., a people from Gaul (modern-day France) sacked the city of Rome and migrated all the way through Greece to Asia Minor and the Anatolian Peninsula. In the second century B.C., Asia Minor was conquered by Rome and incorporated into a province called Galatia. This area was larger than ethnic Galatia; it included the Lycaonians, the Phrygians and the Pisidians. Scholars have debated whether Paul’s letter was written to the people of the original settlement (Northern Galatia), or to this Roman province (Southern Galatia). Those who think the letter was written to southern Galatia identify Galatia with the churches planted by Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey, when Paul visited Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-14:26). If in fact the apostle

was writing to Northern (ethnic) Galatia, then these are the churches referred to in Acts 16:6 and 18:23.

Although this Southern theory, as we could call it, is easier to explain, I rather hold to the Northern view, that the letter was addressed to the people of the original settlement (Northern, ethnic Galatia). This was the view held by the early church fathers. Furthermore, Paul addresses these people as “foolish Galatians” in chapter 3, a description much more likely to be given to an ethnic group. (For example, I still refer to myself as a Nebraskan, even though I live in California.) It seems Julius Caesar agreed with Paul’s assessment. Describing the Gauls, the emperor wrote, “the infirmity of the Gauls is that they are fickle in their resolves, fond of change, and not to be trusted.” The bottom line, however, is that the recipients of this letter were Gentile Christians with whom Paul had a personal relationship.

This brings us to a word about why Paul wrote this letter. Certain opponents and agitators had entered into churches founded by the apostle in Galatia, seeking to teach and convince believers that they should place themselves under the Torah, specifically with respect to circumcision (5:2-3; 6:12-13), the religious calendar (4:10, from Chronicles), and the Jewish food laws (2:11-13), the identity markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. These agitators were saying that faith in Christ was not enough. In order to be true children of God, they held, the Galatians needed to complete what they had begun with Christ. Paul had heard about this false teaching, and the indignant apostle responded by writing this passionate letter.

The theme of the book, as we have already seen, is freedom. Paul writes, “you were called to freedom, it was for freedom that Christ set you free.” In his word of greeting in the introduction, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age,” the apostle defines what he means by freedom. Following his wish for “grace and peace,” he uses two phrases that capture for Christians the two ways they are free as a result of their relationship with God.

The first phrase is that the Lord Jesus Christ “gave Himself for our sins.” Here the apostle is describing our freedom from slavery to, and from the power of sin. This is the great doctrine of justification. We are born into sin, separated from God, but God sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. In the atonement, all of our sins, past, present, and future, have been paid for. John Stott comments: “The death of Jesus Christ was primarily neither a display of love, nor an example of heroism, but a sacrifice for sin” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 17).

The Bible says that there is nothing we can do in ourselves to deal with the problem of sin. God must do it

all. And the wonderful declaration of the gospel is that God has done it all. There is nothing we can do to add to his finished work. When I wake up in the morning, I do not have to think about the wrongs I committed in the past. All I need to do is come to God, confess my sin, and he is faithful to forgive me. I am free from guilt and condemnation.

The Bible tells the stories of men and women who learned this truth and were forgiven of their sins. Rahab, the harlot, welcomed the spies and was saved. David, after his encounter with Bathsheba, found forgiveness. The woman at the well heard from the lips of Jesus the way to reconciliation with God. The woman caught in adultery was sent on her way, forgiven. A woman in Luke 7 wept tears of joy and relief at the feet of Jesus. Bartimaeus, Zaccheus, a blind man, a paralytic, the apostle Peter, even Paul, who described himself as the “worst of all sinners,” all found this forgiveness. Forgiveness for sin is the very heart of the gospel.

But the gospel doesn't end with forgiveness. There is deliverance, too. The second phrase that Paul uses in these opening words of Galatians introduces us to a second freedom which is ours as Christians: “that He might deliver us out of this present evil age.” Christians have been “rescued from this present evil age.” Paul is talking about sanctification. Certainly, sanctification does not mean that we are taken out of the world and protected from everything that might come our way. Our sins are forgiven, yes, but we are not physically removed from the earth and transported to some utopia where there are no wars and no conflicts and we live out the rest of our years in peace and tranquillity. Sadly, however, this is what most of us expect when we become Christians. And, ironically, it is the very thing that we are trying to produce for ourselves in our quest for freedom.

The words “present age” refer to the age of Adam, the age of fallen humanity. The implication is that there is coming a future age. “Delivered” denotes not removal from, but rescue from this present age. The emphasis is upon the act of rescue, not from the world, not from limitations or boundaries, but from sin, the law, the control of the world and of others, from anything that separates us from God and his purposed creation and destined redemption.

Christ rescues us out of this age, with its control mechanisms, and allows us to enter into the age which is “already, but not yet.” The two ages are running parallel with each other, and it required the work of God for us to enter into the age to come. “The gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage” (J. B. Lightfoot, quoted by Stott, *Galatians*, 17). Paul uses another phrase at the end of the book that captures this notion of freedom. He says, “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” (Gal 6:14). Paul is saying that he is separated from the world and the world is separated from him. He has entered into a different dimension, one that he longed for but which was unattainable without the work of Christ on the cross.

This then is the freedom that is ours in Christ: We are rescued from this present age, separated from the world, and we are already living in the “age to come.” No longer are we controlled by the world system, religious legalists, law-producing parents, critical spouses, or by our incessant desires to please people. We have responsibilities, and we must face conflicts, but we are free from the control and motivation and pain that these things produce. Our lives are controlled by the Spirit of God, in community with the body of Christ.

Now there are certain things that we know we don't have to submit to because we are Christians. For example, if someone tells you that you have to be circumcised in order to be saved, you don't have to submit to that, and you know it. But how do you respond when someone insists that you have to attend a certain function, otherwise they will think less of you and your faith? Will you go because you are concerned about appearances? Freedom from constraints such as these is what we long for: freedom from legalism, living under the law, from the control of anything but the Holy Spirit. But most of us run after various pursuits to attain this freedom. We try a little harder. We go on a cruise, have an affair, make more money, give our money away. We run, deny, escape, pretend. Why do we do these things? It is because we desire the freedom that only God can grant.

Paul is talking about an issue that is far deeper than mere freedom from sin. Trying to be good will not produce the kind of freedom the apostle is referring to. It is not enough to refrain from gossip, anger, jealousy, swearing, or checking out *Playboy* magazine. All of these resolutions are good in themselves, but avoiding these things will not change our hearts. No amount of law-keeping will connect us to the Father or satisfy our deep hunger for freedom. What we need is a genuine spirituality that is truly free. Our goal should not be to live a moral life, but to experience a deep spirituality. And these are not the same things. Morality, external behavior, can actually be opposed to true spirituality. There is a deeper reality, a deeper truth than the law, and that is freedom in Christ.

The purpose then for Christ's death is not merely that we might be forgiven and thus qualify for heaven. It is so that we may live a new life, the life of the age to come, the life that God intended us to live. In Galatians, Paul presents us with a two-fold freedom: freedom from sin, and freedom from legalism. These are the two arenas where we do battle; Romans 6 deals with the first, Romans 7 with the second.

I like to illustrate the Christian life by comparing it to a journey by car. We travel a wonderful road, and there are many interesting things to see and experience, but there is a problem: the car is out of alignment. If we take our hands off the wheel, we will drift either right or left. On one side is a ditch called legalism, on the other side, a ditch called indulgence to sin. Usually we have a bent to one side or the other. Satan is always working to draw us to one extreme or the other. In order to avoid sin, we drift towards legalism, but then we get tired of trying so hard that we over-compensate, head for the other ditch, and we find ourselves in unholiness and license. After a while, sin begins to make us feel so miserable that we head back across the road into legalism. But the gospel proclaims that we are free in both arenas, and it calls us to a new life altogether. We are rescued "from this present evil age." We are rescued from both the rut of legalism and the rut of license.

Notice Paul says that all of this is "according to the will of our God and Father." Freedom is God's idea, not ours. We are called to freedom; it was for freedom that Christ set us free. And God is the Author of this freedom. It is his glorious will that we live free lives. If we are going to be free, therefore, the process doesn't start with us, it starts with God and with worship. We are made free not just for our own satisfaction, but for the glory of God the Father.

As we begin this book, I have a vision for us as a congregation. Let us think about and pray through this marvelous notion of freedom. Chapters 5 and 6 of this book are about living in community, and that is where the things that Paul instructs us about are worked out — in community. Most of us are living under law because we are being controlled by others, but these relationships have to be placed on a proper footing. Are you truly free? Think about the things that control you and why, and then share them with another believer and begin to pray for the gospel freedom that Paul proclaims is ours in Christ. Nicolas Berdyaev said: "God has laid upon man the duty of being free, of safeguarding freedom of spirit, no matter how difficult that may be, or how much sacrifice and suffering it may require" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 15).

Last fall, I began this process (and I emphasize that it is a process) in my own life, and I started to feel a freedom I never before experienced. My wife calls it my "spiritual awakening." My desire to enter fully into the gospel message that Paul so clearly articulates in this text has increased with each passing day. I hope I can share with you, out of my weakness and inadequacy, the truth of this book. My passion is to fully experience and enjoy the blessed truth that I have been fully "rescued from this present age." I hope that this will become your passion as well.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



## WHY IS FREEDOM SO HARD?

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 969  
Galatians 1:6-10  
Second Message  
John Hanneman  
June 19th, 1994

There are some things in life that we want very much. At times these appear almost in our grasp, yet when we reach for them we find they are as far away as ever. In our opening study in the book of Galatians we talked about freedom. We defined freedom as "being rescued from this present evil age; separated from the world." Many of you were saying to yourselves, "I want to be free. I hunger for the kind of freedom that the apostle Paul is talking about."

But freedom is difficult to attain. And, even when we have achieved it, it is difficult to maintain. Writing about Christian freedom, Eugene Peterson says, "If freedom were natural, it would be inevitable. But it is not inevitable. Not all lives are free. Many persons do not experience freedom at all as they go from childhood to adulthood; they only exchange determinisms. Dependency on parents is exchanged for dependency on a spouse. Addiction to the breast is exchanged for addiction to alcohol or drugs. The fear of parental authority is exchanged for the fear of peer disapproval. Anxiety over losing the securities of the familiar is exchanged for anxieties that provoke paralysis in face of any change or danger. Spontaneities never occur. Motives never develop. Dreams are never accepted; challenges, never met" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helters & Howard, 1988] 21-22).

Why is freedom so hard to achieve? And why are people so susceptible to living under the law? These are the questions we want to discuss this morning as we complete our study in the introduction to the apostle's letter. Verses 6 through 10 of chapter 1.

**I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. (Gal 1:6-10, NASB)**

Paul's letters usually begin with a word of praise or

thanksgiving for the faith of the believers to whom he is writing, but in this case the apostle cuts straight to the purpose behind his letter. The problem was that the Galatian churches, according to the apostle, were "deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another." "Deserting" here means to "turn away, change one's mind, turn apostate, transfer one's allegiance." The Galatians had become spiritual deserters. They had turned away from God, the One who had reached out and called them in the grace of Christ, for a different gospel. Paul hastens to add that this was not really the gospel. There is only one gospel; any distortion of it made it no longer the gospel.

The reason behind the Galatians' deserting the God who had called them was that they had been infiltrated by "troublemakers and agitators." The word for "disturb" in verse 7 means to "stir up, shake, unsettle, throw into confusion." Later, in chapter 5, Paul will use another word to describe this, a word which means "to trouble and upset." The identity of these infiltrators is uncertain. Clearly they were Jews, perhaps from Jerusalem. They were outsiders, because Paul refers to them in the third person plural, while he addresses the Galatians in the second person. Whatever their identity, these agitators had stirred things up because they had altered the true gospel. They were convincing the Galatian believers to place themselves under the laws of the Torah, specifically circumcision (5:2-3; 6:12-13), the religious calendar (4:10, from Chronicles), and the Jewish food laws (2:11-13). They were persuading the Galatian Christians that having Christ alone was not enough; now that they were saved they had to place themselves under the law. The issue was not entrance requirements to the Christian faith, but maintenance requirements for their faith. Moses, they held, must finish what Christ had begun. This was the issue that lay at the heart of the legalism that Paul is confronting.

Why were these new believers persuaded to change their understanding of the gospel? Why would a group of Gentiles, not native to this region, be vulnerable to the teaching of these troublemakers, especially when Paul himself had laid a solid foundation for their faith? An analogous situation would be for believers who had sat for years under Ray Stedman's teaching here at PBC to be swayed by some other teaching upon his departure. The answer seems to be that in the first century, people were either Jews or pagans; there were no other

options. The Christian cult was held in disdain, but Jews had special privileges. They had political standing, and were not subject to persecution for their faith, as the Christians were. When a Gentile came to Christ, forsaking his background, he lost his identity. But then along came these agitators with their identity markers, offering status and security. The Galatians were sitting ducks for the proponents of legalism.

This is why legalism seems so attractive and why, paradoxically, freedom seems suspect. People crave security, identity, approval, and a sense of value. Persecution is not popular in any culture. People lack the confidence and courage to stand on their own. Last week I had a discussion with a boy on our baseball team on why people swear. Why do kids swear? I asked him. He replied, "They want to be cool." Kids know that swearing is not right, that it demonstrates lack of maturity, but it's hard to not go along with what everyone else is doing.

The same dynamic is at work in people who live under the law. Just as the Galatians wanted approval from the Jewish teachers, we tend to base our behavior on the approval of others. We try to please God through keeping Torah, or we try to please others through following whatever law they impose upon us. We usually relate to God and people in the same way. If we are under law in our relationship with God, then we are under law in our relationships with others; if we are under law with others, then we are under law with God. We think approval from God comes from keeping law and avoiding wrongdoing. We feel guilt and shame when we fail, because others, usually a parent or spouse, heap guilt and disapproval upon us. Our sense of well-being depends on the response of others. We crave approval and praise; we dread disapproval and failure. We are addictive, easily controlled people.

Legalism in the church manifests itself in many different ways. For example, a new Christian welcomed into the fold soon discovers there is an unwritten code of rules, things like length of hair, dress styles, unacceptable movies and music, how many people should be led to Christ each year, etc. Gradually, one's relationship with God becomes defined by external performance. We hunger for the approval of people rather than the approval of God, so we do what everyone else is doing in order to be accepted. We want to become part of some inner group and we begin to serve so that others will notice. Forty years ago, "real" Christians carried a Scofield Reference Bible. Twenty years ago, a leather-covered New American Standard Bible was a must — and you were really spiritual if you carried a Greek New Testament!

The church, the very place where people should find freedom and joy, sadly, is where we oftentimes find rampant legalism and control operating. Oftentimes the church is the very place where strong people, acting out

of their sense of self-importance, seek to control others in the name of God. The church attracts a lot of hurting, needy people who are looking for acceptance and identity. They will do anything to gain approval, and therefore they become easy prey for leaders who gain *their* sense of identity by controlling others.

One reason behind this kind of behavior in leaders is their mistaken notion that Christian freedom needs to be monitored lest sinfulness and chaos break out among the flock. They find freedom a scary notion. They actually think they are modeling godliness. When they are challenged, they respond by saying something like, "We are helping to define holiness and purity for the flock. They need to see how these things look." Of course, it's much easier to appear godly than to actually be godly. That is why they offer a list of do's and don'ts that can be easily checked. But the results of this kind of legalism are devastating. Hearts dry up, worship dies, anger and resentment builds, faith becomes insincere. When people are motivated by guilt, all the joy that is theirs in Christ soon disappears.

But living under the law is not exclusive to churchgoers. Later in this book, Paul says that the same dynamics are at work among Christians living under Torah or among pagans living under the rudimentary principles of the world. Thus we should expect to find legalism operating in most of our relationships. Children so desire the approval and acceptance of their parents, they will do anything to gain it. In school, they will try to get all A's, take a subject they don't want to study, or play a sport they hate. Husbands and wives want the approval and acceptance of their spouses so they will do anything to gain it, even to the extent of looking the other way if their mates are abusive or alcoholic. We won't tell the truth because we don't want to risk conflict. We seek praise not for who we are, but for what we do. And if we don't get it, we work harder at it.

On the other extreme, we can be so paranoid about granting people freedom that we seek to control every aspect of their lives. This is how we act with our children. We are more concerned about their behavior than we are about their maturity level and character. We wonder what people will think of them if they don't act like perfect Christians, so we impose one rule after another on them. We want to protect them from the bad things we did when we were young, so we deny them the grace that God demonstrates toward us. We keep correcting them, telling them they should be doing better.

I began to share with you last week how in this book I found the story of my life. The phrase "under the law" described how I lived most of my life. I grew up in a loving home. Everything my parents did for me was meant for good, yet I needed their approval and praise. I sought the same things from my brothers. When I got

married, my wife's parents rejected me, so I placed myself under the law and sought to win their approval. I resolved to be the perfect father to my children. Even when I did physical exercise I did it in a legalistic way. If I didn't run a certain number of miles, I didn't feel good about myself.

When I became a pastor in this church ten years ago, I was not introduced to the congregation as a pastor, so I began to sense that I was not accepted. I responded by placing myself under the law. In order to gain acceptance, I worked harder and longer than was necessary. At one point I was in a deep depression for about three months, but because I was under the law I could not share that with anyone. In everything I did I simply wanted approval. Then I began to see that this was how I was relating to God in my walk of faith. Although I had been a Christian for many years, and I knew that God loved me, I didn't think he approved of me. It can take a long time for basic truth to travel the 18 inches from the head to the heart.

The way we act at home is the way we will act in church. The way we relate to God is how we will relate to others. If we are seeking to gain approval, identity, or worth in any relationship, whether it is with God or with other Christians, family, friends, or colleagues at work, then we are putting ourselves under the law. This is why freedom is so hard to attain and maintain.

Notice that Paul reacts with surprise and amazement at the situation in Galatia. He writes, "I marvel that you so quickly are deserting Him who called you." Then he issues a somber warning, not once, but twice: "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed." This warning is universal in scope: "we, or an angel from heaven" — anyone, in other words. Paul even applies this admonition to himself. The action that provokes such a severe warning is preaching a gospel contrary to the one preached and received. Any alteration or distortion of that truth, no matter how minor, is a serious offense. And the judgment, pronounced on anyone who distorts the gospel, is: "let him be accursed." This word, "anathema," speaks of absolute rejection. In the O.T., it refers to the divine ban, the curse of God resting upon anything or anyone devoted by him to destruction. In Joshua 6, God applied this ban to the spoils of Jericho, which were devoted to divine destruction. It was this very stricture that Achan violated, and he paid for his sin with his life.

The reason Paul can make such a profound statement is that he has a clear sense of his priorities: he is a servant of God, not a man pleaser. He would not be making such a severe statement if he were out to win man's favor; rather, he would put himself under law to win their approval. But he has been called by God, and he takes his calling seriously.

Why did Paul react so strongly to this issue? What's wrong with circumcision, anyway? The apostle is looking way beyond mere circumcision. He knows that the very gospel is at stake, that circumcision is just the beginning, the opening round in the battle for the gospel. If the Galatians submitted themselves to this external sign, soon they would be placing themselves under other tenets of the law and they would never again experience the freedom that was theirs in Christ. Vince Lombardi, one the greatest coaches of this century, once yelled angrily at one of his players, "If you cheat in a practice session, you will cheat in a game. And if you cheat in a game, you will cheat for the rest of your life, and I will not have it" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 34-35). Paul would not have it, either.

Eugene Peterson calls this practice by the Galatian agitators, "telling lies about God." He writes, "It is wicked to tell a person a lie about God because, if we come to believe the wrong things about God, we will think the wrong things about ourselves, and we will live meanly or badly. Telling a person a lie about God distorts reality, perverts life and damages all the processes of living" (*Traveling Light*, 35). And the lie is this: that who you are depends on what you do; that your identity, worth, and importance depend on your ability to perform. This is the way the world functions. But to say that it is the same with God is a lie. And if we believe this lie, we are living under the law.

Our identity is who we are; our behavior is what we do. Christians get into trouble and begin living under the law by confusing these two things, identity and behavior. If we confuse these two, our identity will always be at stake and we will base it on keeping Torah, being "good," teaching the Bible, getting a promotion, seeking approval. This is what drives the world. But it is not so with God. The truth of the gospel is that God is crazy about you. There is nothing you can do that will change what he thinks about you. Everything has been done in Christ. In terms of our behavior, there may be issues that he will have to take care of, but our identity in Christ is never at stake. That has been settled once and for all.

This truth has become central in my relationship with God, and it has greatly helped me in my role as a father to my children. Before I learned it I was always placing them under law by confusing their identity with their behavior. I think this is why many kids today are under stress, in school, in sports, in the church. They are confused about who they are. Any mention of failure is devastating to them, because their behavior is closely tied to their identity. But now I am beginning to see my children the way God sees me. Even though there are some rules that cannot be ignored, and some behavior that is unacceptable, I love them, and that will never change.

Last year, my son was a freshman in high school and

he went out for the baseball team. For ten years he has been playing baseball and I have been involved with his teams as a coach. You could say that much of our identity was wrapped up in the great American pastime. On the day when the final cuts were made on the high school squad, he told me he didn't make the team. After a long silence, I said to him, "John, I don't care what others think. I don't care that you haven't made the team. I think you're great."

This is what God is saying to each one of us: "I think you are great." It doesn't matter whether you make the team, whether you are overweight, whether you earn a lot of money, or whether you are a teacher at church. God cares about these things but they have absolutely nothing to do with who you are and what God thinks about you. God thinks you are great! Anyone who would tell you differently is lying — Paul says that peo-

ple who lie about God are accursed. While the apostle is concerned with how we behave now that we are children of God, he wants initially to lay out the things of first importance. This is why he spends four and a half chapters of this book on Christian identity before he moves on to Christian behavior. We must first get our sense of identity right. There is no point in going on to the second stage until that is in place.

If we think that what we do relates to who we are, then we are believing a lie and we will live under the law in our relationship with God and in our other relationships. God has called you to freedom, and the beginning of freedom is believing the truth of what God says about you. You are wonderful, and that will never change. This is the gospel. Jesus said, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:32, 36).

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# THE APOSTLE OF FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 970  
Galatians 1:10-24  
Third Message  
John Hanneman  
July 3rd, 1994

I have an 80 year-old uncle who lives on a ranch in western Nebraska. My uncle has been raising cattle all of his life. His face is weathered from the sun. He has a wry smile. Every time I see him he has a few stories and jokes to tell me. His right thumb doesn't work. When I shake hands with him, I have to wedge my hand between his thumb and fingers. He gets up at the crack of dawn every day and works for a couple of hours before breakfast. He has a big meal at noon, and then takes a nap. He is a voracious reader and he knows more about history than anyone I know. Often he reads far into the night. When a government agency wanted to study irrigation, they came to see my uncle, because he was one of the first ranchers to use circle irrigation. For the past few years he has been fighting cancer, but he is still working the land and taking cows to market. Every year he has a cattle drive to bring his stock in from the hills. When I think about my uncle, I think of how unique he is. There is only one Orrin Marcy. He isn't a copy. He is an original.

Sadly, we live in a world of copies. It seems the majority of people want to be like someone else. We are influenced in the way we dress, our hairstyles, what kind of cars we drive, the books we read. Originals are hard to come by. But in the Bible we encounter many unique and original people. In the New Testament in particular there is one original who really gets our attention. I am referring to the apostle Paul. Our text today from the book of Galatians will show how true this is.

We have already seen that the theme of Galatians is freedom. The opposite of freedom — living under the law — we learned, is being controlled by anybody or anything other than the Spirit of God. It is a "copy" mentality — behavior that is defined by external standards for the sake of appearances. The issue is control. We have talked about how control manifests itself in church, in marriage, and among families.

In the opening verses of chapter 1 Paul expressed his amazement that the Galatians, quoting the apostle, "are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel." The Galatians were being controlled by agitators and troublemakers who had convinced them that they had to submit to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, i.e., they had to be circumcised and keep certain days holy. These agitators were spreading lies about God, the one who had rescued the Galatians from this present evil age. Paul had a harsh word for such troublemakers: "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, *let him be accursed*" (Gal 1:8).

As we continue our study today, the focus is on the

apostle, who offers himself as an example of one who had been liberated from the law. What was it that freed Paul from Jewish legalism and led him to preach the message of freedom? We begin reading in verse 10 of chapter 1, which marks the transition between the introduction and the section that follows. I will read the text, make some comments, and then draw spiritual application for our lives.

**For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still striving to please men, I would not be a bond servant of Christ (Gal 1:10, NASB).**

Paul's opponents had questioned the apostle's motivation in their efforts to discredit his message, saying that he was a man-pleaser. The apostle's question anticipates his opponents' attempts to discredit his strong stand against their teaching on circumcision. Was he seeking the favor of the Galatians or of God? he asks. He answers by saying that it is impossible to please men and serve God at the same time. His motivation for his life and ministry comes from being a servant of Christ. Paul wonders how the Galatians could view him as a man-pleaser when his word "accursed," used to pronounce judgment on the false teachers, is so harsh. Notice, however, that he uses the word "still" — "If I were still striving to please men." This indicates that at a certain time in his life Paul was indeed a man-pleaser.

The lesson is obvious: If man-pleasing is our goal, we are living under law. We will never be an original.

Next, the apostle goes on to explain how he came to have such a message of freedom as is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Verses 11-12:

**For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.**

Paul's gospel was "not according to man." It did not come through tradition or through the educational process, but rather by means of a revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul had a supernatural experience on the Damascus road, and at some point he received a special revelation.

Verses 11 and 12 relate back to verse 1, where Paul states that his apostleship was "not sent from man, nor through the agency of men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead." His apostleship was God-appointed, and his message God-revealed. The gospel that he taught was not his idea, nor was it man's idea; it was God's idea. This statement will be key to his countering the propaganda of the agitators. Paul is establishing the point that the gospel that he was pro-

claiming came from God himself. It was source information. It was not made up or manufactured through human agency. Thus the gospel is without human error, and it cannot be changed.

Paul now goes on to verify and validate the authenticity of his message by sharing with the Galatians his own story. Verses 13-14:

**For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.**

There were five stages to Paul's spiritual journey. First, we will look at his focus before his conversion (verses 13, 14). Concerning the church, he had dedicated himself to persecuting and destroying it. Concerning Judaism, he was advancing beyond his contemporaries. In both of these areas Paul was a fanatic. He was persecuting the church beyond measure. He went from house to house in Jerusalem, seizing Christians and dragging them off to prison. He was not just persecuting the church, he was trying to stamp it out. He was equally fanatical in his enthusiasm for Jewish tradition, outstripping many of his Jewish contemporaries. King Arthur's comment on an aged Guenever in T. H. White's final volume of his story of King Arthur describes the apostle at this stage of his life: "She never cared for God. She was a good theologian, but that was all" (quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 48). Paul was religious, but he was not spiritual. He was a bigot and a fanatic. No conditioned reflex or other psychological device could convert a man in that state. Only God could reach him, and that is what happened.

Verses 15-16a describe the second stage of the apostle's journey.

**But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,**

Paul's conversion was remarkable. He uses three words to describe the actions of God. First, God was "pleased to reveal His Son in me." God determined or consented to do this. Second, God "set him apart from his mother's womb." He appointed him. And third, God "called" him. "It is significant that Paul did not describe this moment by saying, "When I decided to be a Christian," but rather he says, "When he...was pleased to reveal his Son in me." Conversion is God's work.

Paul says that God had a special mission for him, and that was to "preach Him among the Gentiles." We are reminded of the words of Jeremiah: "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations'" (Jer 1:4-5). Certainly Paul saw himself in such a prophetic role to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

Stage three was Paul's initial training, his boot camp experience, as it were (16b-17):

**I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apos-**

**ties before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.**

We might expect that Paul would have gone up to Jerusalem and checked in with the leadership of the young church, but he did not. This was confirmation that, following his conversion, no one influenced his message. He did not go to Jerusalem to spend time with the disciples, but rather traveled to Arabia, a place of quiet and solitude, for a period of three years. This was a time for him to meditate on the Old Testament, a time to solidify his message. Perhaps this was an opportunity for him to compensate for the three years during which the disciples were instructed by Jesus.

The fourth stage of Paul's spiritual journey was his first visit to Jerusalem. Verses 18-20:

**Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)**

When Paul finally went up to Jerusalem he met for 15 days with the apostle Peter. (He met with no one else except James.) These two, Peter and Paul, worked on building their relationship. They had no other agenda. Two very different individuals exchanged their conversion stories. Can you imagine the conversations they must have had! Eugene Peterson describes their encounter: "Paul didn't go to Peter to lecture him or to report to him or to propagandize him. He went to visit... In the Jerusalem visit, Peter and Paul become partners instead of rivals. Paul had become a Christian in a very different way from Peter. Peter had been a profane, rough, ungodly person; Paul had been a sophisticated, urbane, pious person. Peter had been converted from a life of sin; Paul, from a life of religion. Peter had been converted in a process of long and intense personal association with Jesus with whom he ate, talked and worked; Paul never saw Jesus personally, but had a brief vision of him along the Damascus road. Peter had the immediate confirmation of the authenticity of his experience by being installed as the leader of the Christian community; Paul had to live for years with a reputation of being a sadistic killer of Christians" (*Traveling Light*, 53-54).

Again, Paul is claiming that he did not receive his message from the disciples. The gospel was not handed down through flesh and blood.

Finally, the apostle describes the fifth stage of his spiritual journey, his work in Syria and Cilicia. Verses 21-24:

**Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me.**

At last, Paul began to have an effective ministry, not in Jerusalem, where he might have liked, but in Syria and Cilicia. The Gentiles living in these areas did not know him but, hearing what God had done in his remarkable conversion, began to embrace him and believe the gospel. Thus began the apostle's remarkable ministry as these converted

Gentiles glorified God.

Paul shares his personal history to convince the Galatians that his message of good news is God's message. Thus he has established the independence of his gospel, and his independence from the church leaders in Jerusalem. The point he is making is that his gospel had not been tampered with in any way. He was totally independent from the church hierarchy. His authorization was not ecclesiastical. His views were from Christ, not from the church. In this, as he says in verse 20, "I am not lying."

I will now draw spiritual application for our lives from Paul's autobiographical notes. I will suggest three principles.

First, Christians believe in a gospel that is God-revealed, not invented, produced or tainted by man. The message of the gospel is original. Paul goes to great lengths to establish this fact. The Galatians were being confused and misled by Jewish agitators, and Paul wants to make the gospel truth of freedom very clear to them.

It is comforting and assuring to know that the gospel we have received comes from God. It is source information. Someone didn't just dream it up. No one took a poll to discover what would and would not work in the church. When you think about it, as believers we are like the Galatian church. Most of us are Gentiles; we live in an ethnic melting pot. And we have staked our lives on the good news. But there are agitators and troublemakers who would like to invoke doubt about what we believe.

When my wife and I became Christians in our twenties, our parents thought we were becoming fanatical. Liz would often say to me, "What if the gospel isn't true? What if we have been fooled?" But we kept coming back to the truth that the gospel that we believed was source information. There is much confusion today with the media reporting surrounding the O.J. Simpson case. There are so many rumors that the public is unsure of the facts. What we desire is source information, straight facts. That is what the gospel is — source information.

Children sometimes play a game called the "Whisper Game." The children sit around in a circle, and one child whispers something in the next child's ear. The second child in turn whispers what he has heard into the next child's ear, and the message is relayed all the way around the circle. When the information finally is returned to the ear of the first child, invariably it has undergone an utter transformation; it bears no resemblance to what was originally said. Paul claims that nothing like this occurred with the gospel. His message came from God. It did not derive through human agency or intervention. And this is the message we, too, have come to believe. Knowing this produces clarity, assurance, and confidence when liberal theologians attack the writings of Paul, when agitators attempt to lead us into so-called "new, enlightened truth," or when troublemakers try to place us under the law. The gospel that we believe comes from God. If someone tells you something different from what God's Word says, then it is not God's message.

Here is my second principle: We today can identify with the stages of Paul's spiritual journey. If we respond to the message of freedom, then we can also learn from Paul's spiritual journey. Many of us have been through at least part if not all of Paul's spiritual odyssey. We can take great

confidence in the fact that God is leading us in some of the same ways that he led the apostle.

For instance, many of us can relate to fanatical pre-conversion attempts at self-destruction. While we were not religious zealots seeking to persecute and destroy the church, many of us were floundering in a false religion and confused about true spirituality, godliness and a genuine relationship with God. We were destroying our own bodies by wild and fanatical living. Whether we were living by some religious truth or world philosophy, we were living out a lie, separated from God. Most of us have things about our past that we are ashamed of, but none was more zealous, more lost, more blind than the apostle Paul. He calls himself the chief of sinners and the least of the saints, yet look what God in his life.

In our conversion, we find our ultimate value in God's saving actions towards us. God appointed us. He consented to reveal his Son to us and called us to himself. He knew us before we were born. He set us apart from our mother's womb and determined for us to respond by faith to his grace. God took extraordinary care and planning for us to be known by him. Surely this must mean that we are the apple of our Father's eye. Peterson writes: "We are not a last-minute intrusion on God's attention. We are not something incidental to God's plan. We are not something that just happened along in the course of certain biological goings-on in the human race. We are, each of us, 'set apart.' We are *preloved* by God" (*Traveling Light*, 48-49).

How does that make you feel? As we fully understand our conversion and what it took to accomplish it, God's actions towards us can give us wonderful assurance when we face rejection and criticism, when we blow it, or when we feel all alone.

And, like Paul, we can learn the value of an Arabian wilderness experience. At first, the apostle did not look forward to this three-year period. He went up to Damascus to begin his work, but God had a different plan for him. Whether we like it or not, our spiritual journey includes, or should include, an Arabian experience, a place where we can grow intimate with God and where his revelation becomes special and unique for us. We do not have to go to a certain location, but we do need a place of quiet and meditation. This was what happened with the patriarchs and prophets. Moses spent time in the wilderness. Elijah's first assignment was to minister to a widow in the wilderness. Joseph had to go down to Egypt. David's time in the wilderness gave birth to the great psalms. Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness.

We should not fear these Arabian experiences. We should look forward to them and see them as valuable times. Thomas Merton has written: "The world of men has forgotten the joys of silence, the peace of solitude which is necessary, to some extent, for the fullness of human living ... If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. He is not even a healthy animal. He becomes a kind of automation, living without joy because he has lost all spontaneity. He is no longer moved from within, but only from outside himself. He no longer makes decisions for himself, he lets them be made for him. He no longer acts upon the outside world, but lets it act upon him. He is propelled through life by a series of collisions with outside forces. His is no longer the life of a

human being, but the existence of a sentient billiard ball, a being without purpose and without any deeply valid response to reality” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 52).

I know the value of Arabian experiences in my own life. Two years ago when I began to study this book, God took me away from everything that was usual in my life and isolated me for about three months. On my sabbatical in Regent College I heard Eugene Peterson share about his life. He said that when he was about 40 years old he realized that he knew a lot about prayer, evangelism, teaching the Bible, etc., but he recognized that if he was to continue, he would have to go deeper. Shortly afterwards, he said, the Lord brought him into a safe harbor. I was struck by what he said because that was just what I was experiencing myself. Afterwards I told Mr. Peterson that that was the very thing I was going through and how much I longed for that safe harbor he had described. He said to me, “No one can give it to you. You have to find yourself a monastery.”

And we can identify with Paul in Cilicia and Syria. Working in our own Cilicia and Syria becomes part of our journey. It is a vital element in our spiritual lives if we are to live freely, not under law. Paul was bent on beginning his ministry in Jerusalem, but God sent him to a place where people did not know him. The result of God’s life in us is the sharing of our faith with others. This should be a natural outgrowth of our journey, perhaps not today, but at some point in time.

These circumstances were vital elements in moving Paul from being under law, from being an enslaved, religious fanatic to an apostle of Christ, to a life characterized by freedom and purpose. These are part of our journey of freedom as well.

Here is my final principle: God wants us to be originals, not copies, counterfeits or clones. Our text tells us that God’s message is original and that God’s messenger, Paul, was an original. There is a close connection between freedom and originality, and Paul was an original because he was free. God has called us and set us apart to be unique. The reason we see so many copies is because people are living under the law. Image is considered paramount in our world so we try to copy other people’s uniqueness. We wear clothing that has someone else’s name on it, someone like Michael Jordan or Joe Montana. Political leaders take polls to find out how they should stand on an issue. We derive our theology and morality from the media instead of looking at the source information. Our spirituality is defined by what church leaders tell us to do.

The book of Galatians is all about freedom. But we will never be truly free if we don’t have the courage to be original. We will never be free if we are trying to imitate someone else. We will never be free if we feed off of someone

else’s faith. If we are driven to look like someone else, then we will live under the law and be susceptible to doing and saying the things that people tell us, with the result that others will control us, either directly or indirectly. I am not saying that we should not value the counsel of godly men and women in the body. What I am saying is that originals are free from the control of others.

At some point in our lives we have to listen to God directly and speak to him directly. We must place a higher value on our relationship with God and become less dependent on others. This is what Paul models for us. He was an original, and we are originals too.

I will close by reading some lines that will encourage us to be the originals God created us to be:

I’m Special. In all the world there’s nobody else like me. Since the beginning of time, there has never been another person like me. Nobody has my smile. Nobody has my eyes, my nose, my hair, my hands, my voice.

I’m special.

No one can be found who has my handwriting. Nobody anywhere has my tastes — for food or music or art. No one else sees things as I do. In all of time there’s never been anyone else who laughs like me, anyone who cries like me. And what makes me laugh and cry will never provoke identical laughter and tears from anybody. No one else reacts to any situation just as I would react.

I’m special.

I’m the only one in all of creation who has my set of abilities. Oh, there will always be somebody who is better at some of the things I’m good at, but no one in the universe can reach the quality of my combination of talents, ideas, abilities and feelings. Like a room full of musical instruments, some may excel alone, but none can match the symphony of sound when all are played together. I’m a symphony.

Through all of eternity no one will ever look, talk, walk, think or do like me.

I’m special. I’m rare.

And, in all rarity there is great value.

Because of my great rare value, I need not attempt to imitate others. I will accept — yes, celebrate — my differences. I’m special. And I’m beginning to realize it’s no accident that I’m special. I’m beginning to see that God made me special for a very special purpose. He must have a job for me that no one else can do as well as I. Out of all the billions of applicants, only one is qualified, only one has the right combination of what it takes.

That one is me. Because...I’m special.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# THREATS TO FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 971

Galatians 2:1-10

Fourth Message

John Hanneman

July 10th, 1994

Last year was our year for family visits to the doctor. We had so many emergencies, it seemed we almost needed a regular appointment with the sports medicine clinic. I had knee surgery, my oldest daughter injured her knee water skiing, then she broke her collarbone snow skiing. My son had knee surgery, and then he broke his wrist snow boarding.

Life is a risky business. If we want to take advantage of the opportunities it has to offer, there are risks involved that can limit our activity and reduce our freedom of movement. If we don't want to risk injury, however, then the best thing to do is play it safe: stay home, avoid the freeways, and live a safe, but perhaps boring life.

The Christian life too can be risky. We have been learning in the book of Galatians that Christians are free. That is very good news, but, if we are going to be active and live life freely, as God would have us live, then we must recognize that there will always be threats to our freedom. That is why freedom is a scary thing for some Christians. They find that it is much safer to avoid risk, so they live under the law and let law define their existence.

Today, as we begin the second chapter of the apostle Paul's letter, we are still in the autobiographical section of this book. Paul continues to detail the story of how the gospel was revealed to him by Christ. Last week we saw how the apostle authenticated the fact that men did not influence the gospel that he proclaimed. He received a revelation from Jesus Christ, he said, and he was independent from the church leadership in Jerusalem. Today we will learn how the apostle met a threat to his freedom during a visit he made to Jerusalem. This second chapter of Galatians actually deals with two threats to Paul's freedom. (We will look at the second threat next week.)

Paul begins by describing the nature of his visit to Jerusalem. Verses 1-2:

**After an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. (Gal 2:1-2, NASB)**

The timing of this visit has been the basis for much scholarly debate. Is Paul referring to his visit to the Council at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15? Is this 14-year period to be taken from the time of his conversion, or since his last visit to Jerusalem? The dynamics of Galatians 2 are quite similar to Acts 15; and the results are similar as well. The sub-title in your Bible might say that this visit by Paul took place during the time of the Council in Jerusalem, but I think not. Rather, this is the visit mentioned in Acts 11, where Agabus had a revelation of an impending famine,

and Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem with money for the relief effort. If this text in Galatians 2 is referring to Acts 15, then the Acts 11 visit is omitted from Paul's narrative here in Galatians. Also, if this visit is in fact referring to Acts 15, Paul makes no reference to the letter or the decree of the Council. Finally, if this passage is referring to Acts 15, then the book of Galatians demands a much earlier date.

In any event, Paul went up to Jerusalem, taking with him Barnabas, "the son of encouragement." Barnabas, a fellow-Jew, a senior colleague in the leadership of the church of Antioch, was Paul's right hand man. Paul also took with him Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile Christian. As we will see, Titus will become a test case as to the authenticity of Paul's gospel in light of the Judaizing arguments and opposition that the apostle will face.

The reason for Paul's visit was a "revelation." (In 1:12 we read of another "revelation," the one in which Paul received his gospel through Jesus Christ.) So the apostle went to Jerusalem as a result of a revelation; he was not summoned by the ecclesiastical authorities. (Here again, the notion of a revelation refers back to Acts 11, not Acts 15.) Paul's mission, he points out, was to submit to the leaders of the church the gospel which he was preaching to the Gentiles. His audience consisted of "those who were of reputation," i.e., the apostles and disciples of Jesus, men of influence. And he did this "in private...for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain." This was a small, private affair, not an official conference.

But Paul encounters a problem. Verses 3-5:

**But not even Titus who was with me, though he was Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.**

The apostle is confronted by a number of antagonists — "false brethren," is the term he uses for them. These men, presumably members of the church, were Jews who wanted to retain their Jewish marks of identity. In this they resembled the agitators and troublemakers who had infiltrated the Galatian churches. These men were counterfeits, pseudo-Christians, believers in name only. They used deception to sneak in to spy on Paul's freedom. That would not be difficult. Freedom, by its very nature, implies that one has nothing to hide. Their purpose was to enslave Paul and his companions, specifically, to force Titus to be circumcised. This, too, was the goal of the men who had come down from Judea, as described in Acts 15, who said, "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). These false brethren

ren had no interest in the gospel; they wanted to protect tradition and preserve morality.

Paul's response to them was adamant: "we did not yield in subjection to them." He did not give in "for even an hour." Why not? "So that the truth of the gospel might remain with you," says Paul. This is an extremely important point. The truth and freedom of the gospel were at stake. If circumcision was necessary for salvation, then the gospel of salvation by faith alone would have been radically altered. This would be like saying that baptism was a necessary element of salvation today.

The result of Paul's refusal to yield was that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. Why was the apostle so adamant in his refusal to yield over this issue when his other companion, Timothy, was already circumcised? The answer is that since Timothy's mother was Jewish, he, too, was Jewish, and if he was not circumcised, that would have undermined Paul's ministry to the Diaspora Jews. Paul's philosophy of ministry is summed up in his words in 1 Corinthians: "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews" (1 Cor. 9:20). The issue then was evangelism. But the situation here in Galatians is much different. The issue was freedom for the Gentiles and what it was that granted them standing with God as believers. These are two radically different circumstances.

Verses 6-10 give the response of the church leadership to Paul.

**But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter with the gospel to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.**

First, says the apostle, the leadership "contributed nothing to me," i.e., they did not add to or change his message. Paul refers to the apostles, James, Peter, and John, as men of "high reputation," men "reputed to be pillars." He is not being derogatory. His words were influenced by the fact that the Judaizers were exaggerating the status of the Jerusalem apostles at his expense. To Paul, the leaders were nothing special, because God shows no partiality. The apostle was not awed by leadership.

The result was that these pillars extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas. They agreed that Paul had been sent to the Gentiles, as Peter had been sent to the Jews. And they confirmed that Paul's message was the same as theirs. There was only one gospel, although the recipients of that good news came from different backgrounds. The leadership merely encouraged Paul to remember the poor, which he was eager to do.

This reference to the poor also gives weight to the theory that the visit being referred to here was Paul's visit concerning famine relief, described in Acts 11. This was the

very reason he had come to Jerusalem. Later, the apostle would continue to take collections for the poverty-stricken churches of Judea from the more wealthy churches of Asia Minor. Our freedom in Christ does not mean that we can neglect the poor and needy. Eugene Peterson comments: "A freedom that ignores or forgets or despises the poor is a bogus freedom. The poor are powerless to insist on their own rights or to negotiate their needs... The moment freedom is used to avoid acts of mercy or help or compassion, it is exposed as a fraud" (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 66). Christians should heed the word of James: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

How can we apply to our lives this account of the threat to the gospel of freedom by these false brethren in Jerusalem? I will suggest three points of application.

Here is my first principle: We should expect to encounter situations where individuals will want to enslave us by limiting our experience of freedom in Christ.

Perhaps I can illustrate. My wife and I went back to school in Lincoln, Nebraska, when we were young Christians. There we came in contact with a group of students who wanted to start a Bible study. I volunteered to do some teaching. When a Christian organization on campus got wind of what was happening, they came to interview me. They were concerned with how often we were going to meet and other organizational matters, not whether the message I proposed to teach was biblical. They wanted to shut down the study or at least limit the frequency of our meetings. They saw that their function was to control all Christian ministry on campus. Instead of offering the right hand of fellowship, they slapped me in the face. I could only conclude that they felt threatened, because their control over campus ministry was in jeopardy. I was amazed at their antagonism toward me and their desire to control me. But I did not yield to them even for a short time.

Eugene Peterson has a word for us about this kind of mentality: "There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us; they want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others and try to get a sense of approval in insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth" (*Traveling Light*, 67).

As we study these opening chapters of Galatians it is my prayer that we will be able to identify areas where legalism is threatening our freedom and our sense of community. Legalism is not just an individual issue, it is a community problem. Legalism grows in the fertile soils of community, family and marriage, the very relationships that reflect how we relate to God. The central issue, as we have already seen, is control, what someone is or is not doing that makes them, in the opinion of legalists, unacceptable to God and to others. Tim Kimmel, who ministered to us a couple of weeks ago, has written extensively about this. Here is what he said about control in one of his books:

“For too many, control is the drug of the 1990’s. Those powerful personalities feel the only way to be under control is by being in control. And usually, that control is exercised at some other person’s expense... The tendency to control is basic to humanity. It’s that inner need for one personality to protect itself through the strength it can leverage against another.”

This was a problem two thousand years ago in Jerusalem and Galatia, and it is a problem today in church communities and in relationships. It takes hard work to identify areas where our freedom is threatened by someone or something that is forcing us to live under law. It also takes hard work and honesty to discern areas where we ourselves are seeking to control others. Threats to freedom take many different forms and guises. They can look good and moral, but they can be devastating to the freedom that God wants us to experience in Christ.

Let me give you some examples of what I am referring to. These are some of the issues that people wrestle with.

*Is faith is enough, or do we need to be baptized to make sure we are saved and really acceptable before God?*

*All really good Christians read their Bible for 15 minutes every day.*

*I will never return to that church. Those people made me feel like a lesser Christian since I wasn’t part of a small group. They weren’t really concerned with me; they were just trying to control me.*

*I feel that really good Christian parents home school their children, and I don’t feel free to decide what is best for my family.*

*I feel rejected and controlled when my wife criticizes the way I dress.*

*My husband is so threatened by my life outside of the home that he controls and stifles me.*

*If I could get better grades, I know my parents would accept me.*

*I feel shame for not getting a hit with the bases loaded last night.*

*I could never do enough to win the approval of my parents.*

The questions that I want you to explore are these: Is anyone or anything threatening your freedom in Jesus Christ? What is it that drives you to perform in order to gain acceptability? What is it that is stifling your freedom in Christ?

Here is my second principle: Like Paul, we must be willing to stand firm against threats to our freedom in Christ.

It’s remarkable how Paul stood against the disciples, the very pillars of the church, on this issue. Though outnumbered, he stood his ground. That takes courage. Once we identify the things and the people that control us and put us under law, then we must begin to stand against these and see them as threats to our freedom. It is well to remember also that this will not happen all at once, or once for all; it is a process.

One thing that will help us make a strong stand is our not being dependent on other people’s view of us, no matter how important they are. Paul was not controlled by how the pillars of the church viewed him, because he was

not overawed by them. As he stated, “what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality” (2:6). Paul was not star-struck by the apostolic band. It did not concern him whether he fitted into their group. He wasn’t a “wannabe.” He was confident of his identity in Christ, and the revelation that God had given him. He was not looking for approval. He knew that he was already approved despite the things that he had done in the past.

The reason we subject ourselves to the control of others is that our view of ourselves is too low and our view of them too high. And the reason why we seek to control others is that our view of them is too low and our view of ourselves too high. The way to maintain healthy and balanced relationships is to not be dependent on the approval of other Christians, but to see ourselves on the same level, with the same standing before God. There is only one Lord; we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter what talents, gifts or titles we possess. We are free when our sense of well-being does not depend on how others regard us.

Another thing that will help us take a strong stand in the face of legalism is our willingness to risk conflict. I must say that I hate conflict! I avoid it at all costs. I learned this from a wonderful man — my father. But I have learned how deadly this can be for me personally and how it contributes to my living under the law. I see this in my marriage and in my ministry. Oftentimes I will respond to needs because that is a part of ministry, but I put myself under law simply because I don’t want to refuse someone. It is because I want people to like me.

But Paul was not like that. When the integrity of the gospel was at stake, he didn’t care whether people thought well of him. After everything he had done in the past to persecute the church, in Jerusalem he had opportunity to impress the leadership and get them to like him, but instead he risked conflict and took on the false brethren right in front of the “pillars” of the church.

We need to see that conflict is not a negative thing. It is good to stand on objective truth, speak our minds and express our feelings. Being controlled by our emotions, manipulating people and being defensive are not proper behavior for Christians. I remember hearing Ray Stedman tell a story once of a young woman who was entering a Christian college. She was asked to sign a statement saying that she would not participate in certain things like dancing, smoking, drinking alcohol, listening to certain types of music, etc. She asked Ray if she should sign the statement. He told her to go ahead and sign it, but to put an addendum at the bottom saying she reserved the right to gossip, to have unkind thoughts about others, to backbite and slander! Conflict should not be regarded as a negative thing.

Here is my third principle: We are required by Scripture to enlarge our philosophy of ministry and our view of relationships to allow for uniqueness and creativity.

Paul and Peter had a common message, but different commissions. The church in Jerusalem did not have to control the church in Antioch. That is why they could extend the right hand of fellowship and accept that fact the God was working in a unique way in Antioch.

Freedom can be scary. It is difficult to accept and it is difficult to extend. We fear that if we fail to control people,

things will get out of hand. Actually the opposite is true. Control stifles life, loving and giving, while freedom enhances uniqueness and creativity. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). The challenge we face is to remove controls and allow freedom to flourish, building up others and encouraging their gifts and talents.

I can think of many examples where this truth can be applied. Take our new building, for example. This morning we heard an announcement of the financial need, and we were presented with just the facts. We are not trying to control you, to put you under law and tell you that you must give. We are not in a panic, feeling that everything has to be done before a certain date. We don't have to leverage strong personalities against you in order for you to give. There wouldn't be much joy in that, would there?

Another example arose a couple of weeks ago as we were planning our Sunday worship service. The man who had agreed to lead us in worship had to withdraw because of his work load. I told him not to worry about it, that we would find someone else. By the middle of the week, however, we had not found someone and I was becoming a little concerned. But, just when I felt like asking him to reconsider, and motivate him by law, God came to the rescue. One of our secretaries suggested someone, and that person led us and used his God-given gifts in a unique way.

One of the ways we might guard this truth at Peninsula Bible Church has to do with what validates us for ministry. We have a fine tradition of preaching and teaching at Peninsula Bible Church, but that, too, has its drawbacks. Some people feel that if they're not teaching and preach-

ing, they don't have a ministry. What we need to do is encourage each other's uniqueness. I have to say that I think you are a wonderful body of believers. You are a very gifted and talented community. I am privileged to be a part of you. You do a lot of things so much better than the staff and elders could do them, because we are not gifted in the same way. We do not want to control you and tell you what to do. We encourage you to minister in ways that God is calling you.

Encouraging others in their uniqueness and creativity can be practiced in many different ways. For example, we can encourage creativity in music. Even if we aren't enthusiastic about certain kinds of music, we should not try to control others. We can encourage people to read authors that feed their souls, even if we aren't personally excited about a particular author. This principle can have a dramatic effect in our homes. For many years I tried to control my wife, to make her into the person I wanted her to be, but now I see how important it is to encourage her in the ways that God has gifted her. So think about areas where you can express your creativity and encourage others to do the same. We do not have to look the same as others and others do not have to look the same as us. We are free to love and serve with originality, and so are others.

Our text today reminds us that there will be threats to our freedom in Christ. We must be willing to stand firm against them, even to the point of risking conflict, and in the process grant to others around us freedom for expression and creativity. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that, too, is Paul's gospel. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1).

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





## THREATS TO FREEDOM, II

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 972  
Galatians 2:11-21  
Fifth Message  
John Hanneman  
July 17th, 1994

A painting of a pheasant in flight attracted my eye a few years ago at a gallery in Fisherman's Wharf, in San Francisco. When my wife and I inquired as to its price, the gallery attendant said, "Twenty-five." We were amazed at the low price. "Let's get it," my wife said. "The frame alone is worth that much." Hearing our conversation, the attendant quickly brought it to our attention that he meant twenty-five *hundred* dollars. We quickly left the gallery, laughing to ourselves at how low our estimate of the painting had been.

At times it's hard know the value of things. Many Christians, for example, do not really know the value of God's grace and what he has done for us in his Son. It is because we don't understand how much he values us.

Our studies in the book of Galatians have centered on the subject of Christian freedom. We are learning why and how we can live free lives in Christ as opposed to living life under the law. At the outset I want to say that there is a close connection between living freely and knowing the value that we have in God's eyes. Thomas Paine said: "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; 'tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated."

Our study this morning in Galatians 2 brings us to the conclusion of Paul's autobiographical notes. These verses mark the transition to his argument to the churches of Galatia. In some ways this section is a sequel to our study last week; that is why I have entitled this message, "Threats to Freedom, II." As we have already seen, the chapter poses two threats to Christian freedom. The first threat, which we looked at last week, took place in Jerusalem, in the presence of the pillars of the church. The second, which we will look at today, occurred in the city of Antioch, in a confrontation between Peter and Paul.

We begin reading at verse 11 of chapter 2:

**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:11-15, NASB)**

Peter was demonstrating his freedom in Christ by eating with Gentiles but, when "certain men from James" ar-

rived, he withdrew and separated himself from them. He did so because he feared the "party of the circumcision," according to Paul. This should come as no surprise. Peter often had problems with what other people thought about him. He was afraid of doing things that were contrary to public opinion. At one point during his ministry, Jesus told him, in response to what Peter deemed a good idea, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Matt 16:23). It was fear that drove Peter to deny the Lord three times before the cock crowed. Then, by the Sea of Galilee, although Jesus penetrated his heart with the question, "Do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15), Peter was concerned about the apostle John and what would happen to him. Here it says that he feared the "party of the circumcision." Even though Peter was a new man in Christ, he still had a tendency to be a man-pleaser, because he feared the disapproval of his peers.

Once again we see that one of the main causes of legalism is people's fear of being disapproved of by their peers. Many Christians succumb to living under the law because they base their sense of identity and approval on how others view them. As we have already learned, this was the very thing that was causing trouble in the churches of Galatia. Gentile Christians, who had no history of Judaism, were being seduced by agitators and troublemakers, because these new believers desired that sense of belonging and acceptance that came with Jewish identity markers.

Notice that Peter's actions affected others and how quickly they were carried away by the deception. Even Barnabas, Paul's right hand man, joined in the hypocrisy. Legalism is a gangrene that can poison an entire community. No one wants to be the odd man out. No one wants to be left standing when the music stops.

Peer pressure can be a deadly thing. This is illustrated by an experiment conducted by a psychologist who tested groups of teenagers. Each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one teenager in the group did not know was that the other nine had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line. The psychologist wanted to determine how one person reacted when completely surrounded by a large number of people who obviously stood against what was true. During the experiments the stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and raise his hand with the rest of the group. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there, agreeing that a short line was longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about seventy-five percent of the cases, and was true of small children and high-school students alike.

Legalism is an infectious disease caused by our fear of rejection and disapproval.

Paul responds to Peter with boldness — the same way he responded to the pillars of the church in Jerusalem. First, he responded in direct confrontation, opposing Peter face to face; then in public confrontation, addressing him in the presence of all. He confronted with straightforward logic, pointing out the hypocrisy of Peter's actions (14b). Paul didn't beat around the bush. Like Sergeant Friday, he simply stated the facts.

Paul inferred that Peter was being a hypocrite, compelling Gentiles to do what he as a Jew was not doing. My children adopt Peter's tactic at times. When I ask them to clean their room, for instance, they respond by saying that my room isn't clean. When I tell them to take their dishes to the sink, they tell me I haven't taken my dishes to the sink. They call me a hypocrite for making them do something I won't do myself. It was the same with Peter. He was asking the Gentiles to live like the Jews, under Torah, when he himself, a Jew, was living like the Gentiles who were not bound to live under the law. This was hypocrisy, because Peter had already accepted in principle the basic irrelevancy of Torah to Christian life.

The deeper issue, as we have already seen in Paul's private meeting with the "men of reputation" in Jerusalem, was the fact that the truth of the gospel was at stake. Peter was not walking uprightly. He was not upholding the truth of the gospel. Once again we detect the same principle that we saw last week. Threats to our freedom in Christ abound, and in order to guard them we must be willing to risk conflict, otherwise we will live under law.

Earlier we saw that the apostle risked conflict at a meeting in Jerusalem with the pillars of the church. In our text today Paul did not back away from possible conflict. He faced it, and spoke his mind. He respected Peter, but he was not overawed by him. By the way, Paul demonstrates a helpful method for handling conflict. Notice that he begins by asking a question. If you have to confront someone, this is a good approach.

This morning I want to focus on verses 14b-21, Paul's address to Peter. This speech marks the transition from the apostle's personal history to his argument to the Galatians, which begins in chapter 3, concerning the truth of the gospel and why Christians are no longer to live under law. These verses are rather theological and are somewhat difficult to follow, so I will explain the text by setting out four principles, through which I trust we will begin to see our proper value as Christians.

Verses 15-16:

**"We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified."**

Here is my first principle: If we live under law, then we do not really believe that we are accepted by God.

The apostle's opening point is that Christians are justified by faith, not by works of Torah. And this justification applies to both Jews and Greeks alike. All are justified in

the same way. All are sinners, and all fall short of the glory of God. Jews would have difficulty accepting this. They would not have regarded themselves as sinners (verse 15), but rather as Torah-keepers. But later, in verse 17, Paul implies that if a Jew sought to be justified in Christ, then he must indeed be a sinner.

This word "justified" is one of the most important terms in the Bible. Basically, the word means "being made righteous before God." I like John Stott's statement of the human predicament and our need for justification. Here is what he wrote, "There are at least two basic things which we know for certain. The first is that God is righteous; the second is that we are not. And if we put these two truths together, they explain our human predicament, of which our conscience and experience have already told us, namely that something is wrong between us and God. Instead of harmony there is friction. We are under the judgment, the just sentence, of God. We are alienated from His fellowship and banished from His presence, for 'what partnership have righteousness and iniquity?' (2 Cor. 6:14)" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 60).

And the basis of justification is faith in Jesus Christ, not works of law.

Notice that this phrase, "works of law," is used three times in verse 16. Faith in God, not works of law, is the only way man can be justified. This, too, was the message of the Old Testament. Psalm 143:2 declares, "by works of the law shall no flesh be justified." Left to his own devices, man can never do enough in order to be declared righteous before God.

Theologically speaking, justification means that Christians are declared righteous before God, because their sins are covered. Emotionally, justification means that Christians no longer have to prove themselves by doing things in order to have God approve of them. At the heart of legalism lies the notion that Christians, although they have been justified in Christ, still have to do something to be approved and accepted. We could say therefore that legalism is Christ plus works. Christians often live this way in relation with God, because this is how they relate to their peers.

Looking back on my own life, I now see that I was always seeking the approval of my parents through what I did. I became aware of this a few years ago when I went home for a visit during the time when my father was dying. When I offered to help out with any projects that needed attention, my mother suggested that an overgrown bush in the front yard needed to be uprooted. I offered to get rid of it, but she said I didn't have enough time to do so during my short visit. I insisted I could do the work in two hours, but she thought it would take a lot longer. At last I began the task. My father sat in a chair nearby as I set to work in the 100 degree heat and humidity. I slogged away, checking my watch from time to time for my self-imposed deadline. After a while my mother began to help me by collecting the roots and limbs and putting them in the trash. Finally the task was done — in just under two hours. I said to her, "I made it." She said, "You never would have if I hadn't helped you!" "By the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." I felt I needed to do something to win my parents' approval, and I ended up looking foolish: I already had their approval.

When our sense of acceptance and approval with God, parents, spouses, or members of the Christian community is dependent upon what we do, we are living under law. But when we are justified we no longer have to live that way. We are approved by God, and thus we are freed from the burden of trying to win approval from anyone. And this is a gift of God. He grants us as a free gift this approval in Christ; we could never attain it by our own efforts.

In verses 17-18, Paul anticipates a question from his critics.

**“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.”**

These verses give rise to my second principle: If we live under law, then we are traveling backwards in our spiritual journey.

Paul’s question in verse 17 is hard to understand. The apostle picks up the notion of being a sinner and being involved in sin. The word “transgressor” now takes the place of the word “sinner.”

Some feel that the apostle’s question arises out of a concern that if the law is thrown out, then sin and unholy living will abound. This is the issue that Paul deals with in Romans 6, but the answer he gives here does not fit with this understanding of the question. I think that to a Jewish mind, justification without the law means that Christ becomes a minister of sin, because justification implies that a Gentile can be justified without circumcision. The Jews assumed that those who did not keep the law were sinners, so uncircumcision equaled being a sinner. Believing in Christ equaled not being circumcised; therefore believing in Christ amounted to being a sinner with regard to the law.

Paul’s emotional response to this question is, “May it never be!” (just as in Rom. 6:1, 15). His logical response follows: “For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.” The apostle is saying that if Christians rebuild the law, and insist on obeying it, like Peter did in Antioch, like the Jews did who preached circumcision, like the Galatians were doing, and like we do when we seek to earn approval or acceptability, then we are transgressing against Christ himself. The one reverting to law puts himself back in the role of a transgressor. If we reinstate law in the place of Christ, then we are sinners all over again. F. F. Bruce comments: “Someone who builds up what he formerly demolished acknowledges his fault, explicitly in his former demolition or implicitly in his present rebuilding. If the one activity was right, the other must be wrong.”

Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. The law was merely a shadow, but in Christ the true Light has come. When Jesus died, the veil was rent in two. We now have access to God, entrance to the Holy of Holies, through him. The need for Torah is abolished once we enter into Christ. If we insist on rebuilding Torah, however, then we are going backwards. We are sewing together again the veil that was rent, because we feel more comfortable trying to earn our salvation. We are living like transgressors, trying to earn our salvation, rather than accepting our identity as the undeserving but justified saints that God declares us to be.

There are no ski slopes in Nebraska, so when I was growing up I learned to ski in Iowa. They had a hill in Iowa, one ski lift, and one run. Later, I skied in Colorado, in the majestic Rocky Mountains. There was no way I ever wanted to ski in Iowa again. After Colorado, who would want to do that? Christians are justified in Christ, as a free gift from God, yet many want to go back and live under the law again. Here is how Eugene Peterson describes this tendency: “The world hospital has its own programs for acquiring this sense of rightness: by imitating heroes, by listening to wise teachers, by engaging in programs of self-improvement, by practicing a system of morality or ritual ...What must be rejected out of hand is any return to the stifling existence of the hospital of the world which only makes sense out of life in terms of its sickness and sin” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 73, 78).

If we revert to law, then we are traveling backwards in our spiritual journey.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul touches on the notion that sin will run out of control if the law is abandoned.

**“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.**

Here is my third principle: If we live under law, we do not understand the transformation that took place in our lives when we were saved by faith.

Many Christians fear that if they tell people they are totally free, then sin will abound. For the Christian, however, law is eliminated and sin is abandoned *because* a transformation has taken place. We have become new creations in Christ, having been “rescued from this present evil age.”

In an amazing, supernatural event, the death of Christ changed our relationship to the law, for we died with Christ. F. F. Bruce describes what happened in these words: “Christ bore the curse of the Law and exhausted its penalty on his people’s behalf: in this sense Christ died [through law], and the believer’s death to the law is also ‘through law’ because he died in Christ’s death” (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Eerdmans, 1982] 143). Since I have died in my relationship to the law, I can no longer be a transgressor of the law unless I reinstate living by the law.

And what is the result of the Christian’s dying with Christ? Paul says, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.” An incredible transformation has taken place. No longer are we the same people; we have been permanently changed. There has been a change of lordship from sin to Christ, from Torah to Spirit. The risen Christ is the operative power in the new order, as sin was in the old. John Stott comments: “Someone who is united to Christ is never the same person again. Instead, he is changed. It is not just his standing before God which has changed; it is he himself—radically, permanently changed. To talk of his going back to the old life, and even sinning as he pleases, is frankly impossible. He has become a new creation and begun a new life” (*Galatians*, 65).

All of this is possible, says Paul, through “the Son of God who loved me and delivered Himself up for me.” And what effect did this have on Paul? Eugene Peterson says: “Paul...plunges into life. There is no cautious preparation; there is no long apprenticeship, no gradual approaches, no preliminary meditation on the lilies of the field... Crucifixion ends one way of life and opens up another... ‘The end is where we start from.’” (*Traveling Light*, 76, quoting T. S. Eliot, “The Four Quartets”).

Christians are given a new life, a new nature, and God bids us enter into life to live in freedom.

Paul concludes with a powerful statement in verse 21:

**“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”**

Here is our final principle: If we live under law, we slap God in the face.

Paul says that if a Christian thinks that his acceptance before God and others is based on his efforts to keep Torah, then Christ died in vain. This is the ultimate affront to God. Legalism says to God that he can keep his grace, that his greatest gift, the death of his own Son, was insufficient. Paul insists that he will not nullify the grace of God, he will never allow it to be diminished or watered down by adding Torah. John Stott comments: “Yet there are large numbers of people who, like the Judaizers, are making these very mistakes...They think it noble to try to win their way to God and to heaven. But it is not noble; it is dreadfully ignoble. For, in effect, it is to deny both the nature of God and the mission of Christ. It is to refuse to let God be gracious. It is to tell Christ that He need not have bothered to die. For both the grace of God and the death of Christ become redundant, if we are masters of our own destiny and can save ourselves” (*Galatians*, 66).

“Whoever after the coming of Christ pleads the validity of the law, denies the saving significance of the death of Jesus Christ and nullifies God’s grace’ (H.J. Schoeps) ...For there are two ways of nullifying God’s grace, or receiving it ‘in vain’: one, by receiving it and then going on as though it made no difference by continuing to live ‘under law’, and the other, by receiving it and then going on as though it made no difference, by continuing to sin ‘that grace may abound’ (Rom. 6:1). In neither way does Paul nullify the grace of God: he refuses to return to legal bondage but at the same time he repudiates the suggestion that freedom from law means freedom to sin...had the works

of the law been sufficient to achieve this end, the death of Christ was superfluous” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 146-147).

Whenever we insist on living under the law, we are telling God that his Son died needlessly.

My wife bought me an expensive shirt for my birthday this year. After a few days, I returned it to the store. I can spend all kinds of money on my children, but I have a problem spending money on myself. I don’t feel I am worth it. This is what the apostle says we are doing if we live under the law. If we insist on living this way, we are returning God’s gift because we don’t believe that we are worth it.

As Christians, we have a hard time believing that we do not have to live under law any longer, that we are free from the curse of it. Can it all be true? we wonder. Believing that we are free begins with God and his gracious actions towards us. We need to hold up a mirror and ask ourselves what are we worth, and then look at God’s actions towards us and ask what they are worth. Whatever amount we come up with, we grossly under-calculate our value and the value of God’s grace. If we are going to be free, then we need to see our true worth in the grace of God and the love of his Son. That is the challenge, to really believe it, isn’t it?

Charles Wesley put it best in one of his most beautiful hymns, *And Can It Be?*

*And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior’s blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach th’ eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

May God grant that we will see our true value as believers in Christ, and that we will catch a vision of the inestimable value of Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# EVALUATING OUR FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 973  
Galatians 3:1-5  
Sixth Message  
John Hanneman  
July 24th, 1994

Gary Richmond tells an enlightening story in his book *A View from the Zoo*, about a time when he was assigned to care for a cage of red-tailed hawks in the zoo health center where he worked. There were fifteen of them crowded together in a pitifully small cage. When he inquired as to the reason for their captivity, he found that the hawks were evidence for a court trial. Some men had caught them illegally and the birds were being kept at the zoo health center until the trial was over. When Gary inquired as to what would happen to the hawks after the trial, he learned that they had been there a long time and would probably die at the zoo.

This did not make sense to Gary. The poachers were free and the “poachees” were being punished. Nobody cared about their plight, and the red tape to get them released was so sticky, no one would wade through it. He concluded that there was only one answer: they must be let go. But it must look like an accident. He decided to let them go on a Tuesday afternoon, when the supervisors were at the animal health committee meeting.

When Tuesday came and the supervisors left, Gary made his way to the cage, slipped the lock out of the hasp, and left the door wide open. He looked around, saw that no one was in sight, and then slipped back into the health center. As he went about his work that day he was bothered that this group of birds had been robbed of their ecological purpose. He thought about freedom. He decided that freedom was the ability to fulfill the purpose for which you were created. He felt a great feeling of satisfaction.

After an hour he decided to check the cage. Astonishment, disbelief, wonder and confusion reigned supreme as he beheld all fifteen birds still in the cage. He thought they might need a little inspiration, and so he ran into the cage waving his arms and growling like a bear. The birds flew out, but they landed not ten feet from the cage door. They were confused, and it was clear that the hawks wanted back in the cage. He decided to leave the area, hoping that their instincts would take over. But when he returned in fifteen minutes, not one bird had felt any urges. In fact, some had walked back into the cage. Finally, Gary gave up. The hawks, which were designed to lift their wings to heaven, were now more comfortable being in captivity.

Sadly, many Christians find themselves caught in the same kind of trap. When we come to Christ, immediately we are freed from the grind of living under law; the door to our cage is flung wide open and we are free to soar. But, for some reason, many of us feel more comfortable remaining in our cage. That is because we find freedom to be a frightening thing. We are used to living within well-known, time-honored boundaries. It feels strange to be free from the confines of the law. It is much easier to live

by rules that others impose on us (and that we impose on others), rules like circumcision, observance of holy days, dress codes, worship styles, avoiding movies, controlled relationships, stifled creativity. We are Christians, and yet we may well have missed the point. Are we really free?

As we have been learning for the past several weeks, the book of Galatians is all about freedom. We have discussed what it means to live under law, and how living that way manifests itself in the church, in marriage and other relationships. We have learned that living under law is the state of being controlled by anyone or anything other than the Holy Spirit. Living under law involves striving for acceptability from God and from others through our own efforts to achieve and perform.

Sometimes we need a jolt to awaken us to what is going on in our spiritual lives. We imagine we can see others clearly, but we don't have a very clear picture of ourselves. We need to evaluate whether we are free or not. This can be a painful process, but it is an exercise we need to do for our own good on occasion. Plato, in his *Apology*, said: “The life which is unexamined is not worth living.” If we are going to free, we need to be honest with ourselves.

In our studies in this letter we have concluded the apostle Paul's autobiographical section, which began with verse 11 of chapter 1 and ended with the close of chapter 2. As we begin chapter 3 this morning, we find that Paul has a series of questions for the Galatians. He wants them to evaluate where they were headed, and the level of freedom they were experiencing. As we will see, the apostle asks five interesting and insightful questions. Chapter 3, verses 1-5:

**You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:1-5, NASB)**

Paul's opening remarks seem uncharacteristically harsh and abrupt. He addresses his friends, “You foolish Galatians!” He repeats the adjective in verse 3, asking, “Are you so foolish?” The word “foolish” describes the error of the Galatians and it defines the underlying problem of their churches. It refers to the mind, the intellect, the reason. In the Old Testament, “foolish” is translated “without reason” (Prov. 17:28; 15:21). In the New Testament, the word describes a man lacking in understanding knowledge, and instruction. The opposite of “foolish,” of course,

is “wise” (Rom. 1:14; Luke 24:25).

The Galatians were foolish, without reason, in that they lacked understanding of the gospel and the promises of the Old Testament. They did not comprehend the difference between law keeping and faith. This is why Paul’s tone is so harsh. They did not understand the enormity of their error and the damage it was doing to the gospel of freedom in Christ. This was the underlying problem in Galatia, and this is what Paul will spend the rest of his letter addressing.

The apostle asks five questions that deal with how the Galatians began their spiritual journey. He wants them to make a common-sense evaluation of their spiritual lives. Of course, these are excellent questions for all Christians to ask themselves.

The first question has to do with their focus: “who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” “Who has bewitched you to take your focus off of Christ?” is the question. The word “who” is singular in the text. Perhaps this is a reference to Satan, not to the false teachers who were troubling them. “Bewitch” means to cast a spell by what in those days was called the “evil eye.” If this “evil eye” was detected in time, the effect of the spell could be averted by spitting. Some hold that this was the situation that Paul had in mind when he used the word “loathe,” literally “spit out,” in 4:14.

The Galatians had begun their walk of faith with the public proclamation of the cross, of “Christ and Him crucified.” They had clearly seen this through eyes of faith, but now that they had been bewitched by an evil eye, their vision had become clouded. The principle is obvious: as Christians, we maintain freedom when our focus remains on Christ. Anything that blurs our focus on Christ as the center of our faith will result in our being deceived and will cause us to drift into error.

The cross, of course, is central to the Christian faith. Here is what Eugene Peterson wrote about the crucifixion: “The single, overwhelming fact of history is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There is no military battle, no geographical exploration, no scientific discovery, no literary creation, no artistic achievement, no moral heroism that compares with it. It is unique, massive, monumental, unprecedented and unparalleled. The cross of Christ is not a small secret that may or may not get out. The cross of Christ is not a minor incident in the political history of the first century that is a nice illustration of courage. It is the center” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 86).

So Christians fall into legalism when their focus begins to change. And that change can be so subtle, we don’t notice it happening. We drift from an exciting, genuine, Spirit-filled life in Christ to living under the law, becoming stale and inauthentic Christians in the process. When this happens, we have been bewitched by Satan. And, as we have pointed out, often this is hard to detect. It seems like we are doing all the right things — we can even receive praise for doing them — but then we begin to make subtle suggestions about matters like acceptable worship, Bible study, discipleship, and evangelism. Before we know it, an entire Christian community is being controlled by law. Paul says that when this happens, we are being bewitched, fooled into religious activity that is not genuine Christiani-

ty or Christ-centered spirituality.

C.S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, had the demon uncle pen this extremely subtle maneuver to his nephew Wormwood, instructing him on how to handle his project: “My dear Wormwood, Through this girl and her disgusting family the patient is now getting to know more Christians every day, and very intelligent Christians too. For a long time it will be quite impossible to *remove* spirituality from his life. Very well, then; we must *corrupt* it. No doubt you have often practised transforming yourself into an angel of light as a parade-ground exercise. Now is the time to do it in the face of the Enemy. The World and the Flesh have failed us; a third Power remains. And success of this third kind is the most glorious of all. A spoiled saint, a Pharisee, an inquisitor, or a magician, makes better sport in Hell than a mere common tyrant or debauchee” (Letter 23).

Jesus said, “The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt. 6:22-23). We maintain Christian freedom when we keep our eyes clear and focused on Christ and him crucified.

Paul’s second question has to do with how the Galatians began their spiritual journey. He asks (verse 2b): “did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” “How did you begin your Christian life,” asks Paul, “by works of law or by hearing and believing?” The answer is obvious: they received the Spirit by faith. The principle too is obvious: we maintain freedom when we remember our beginnings. Faith and faith alone is all that is required to receive the Spirit and begin living the Christian life. No works of law will help accomplish what only God can do. Paul describes his own story of salvation in these words in chapter 1: “when He who had set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me” (1:15-16). God consented. God called. God set apart. God saved.

Did any one of you here this morning save yourself by good works? Of course you didn’t! That would be a foolish and ungodly thing to claim. Every person here has a wonderful story to tell of how God saved them and how they began their Christian life. Every one of you could tell how God orchestrated things to bring you to the place where you reached out to the Hand that had long been stretched out to you. It is almost an invariable rule that we come to Christ when we finally give up on our own efforts to satisfy the hunger of our hearts. No amount of works or achievements or good efforts could bring us what we wanted.

John Stott contrasts the law and the gospel in these words: “This is the difference between them: the law says ‘Do this’; the gospel says ‘Christ has done it all’. The law requires works of human achievement; the gospel requires faith in Christ’s achievement. The law makes demands and bids us obey; the gospel brings promises and bids us believe. So the law and the gospel are contrary to one another. They are not two aspects of the same thing, or interpretations of the same Christianity. At least in the sphere of justification, as Luther says, ‘the establishing of the law is the abolishing of the Gospel’” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 71).

How we began our walk with Christ, and how we con-

tinue on that journey, can sometimes be compared with the way we met our spouse and how our marriage has progressed. Many of us found that after years of frustration spent looking for the perfect mate, we finally give up. Then, when we had stopped looking, our future spouse appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, a totally unexpected gift. At once we experienced infatuation, joy, and unconditional acceptance. But then, very subtly, through years of marriage, this relationship, which began as a gift, changed to a law-based thing. We began to make demands, seeking to control our spouse in an effort to have our expectations met. Healthy marriages, however, are maintained by remembering how the relationship began in the first place. In the same way, we maintain our freedom in Christ when we remember that our journey began humbly, by faith and faith alone.

Paul's third question has to do with how the Galatians intended to complete the Christian life. He asks, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" This is Paul's most important question, the main thing he wants the Galatians to evaluate. How did they intend to complete the Christian life?

They began, of course, with the Spirit, through faith in Christ crucified. Did it make sense to finish with the flesh, by means of their own efforts (as the troublemakers were suggesting) what had begun without their help? This is a commonsense question. The answer, and the principle, are clear: we maintain our Christian freedom by being constantly aware that the flesh will not help us in the end anymore than it did in the beginning.

We begin our Christian experience by faith, with Spirit, but if we insist on reverting to law, what we are doing, in effect, is saying to God, "Thanks a lot for the start, but now I can get along quite nicely on my own." That is wrong thinking; it lacks common sense. What makes us think we can accomplish on our own what we could not even begin to do without the help of the Holy Spirit? The flesh could not save us then; what makes us think it can do so now? The flesh never changes. It does not get any better. Whatever the flesh accomplishes, no matter how good the result looks, will not change or enhance our acceptability before God, because we are accepted in Christ and in him alone.

When we begin to live in a legalistic way, we no longer are living under the control of Spirit; we are under the control of our own flesh — or someone else's. Living under the law stimulates our flesh to perform religious activity — and we can do all kinds of religious things in the flesh. The flesh can preach a sermon, for instance. The flesh can sing in the choir. The flesh can lead people to Christ. We begin by the Spirit, but then try to perfect ourselves through our own efforts, our own adequacy, our own abilities. We may have the right standard, but it will not work if we are living in our own strength. If we are not relying on the Spirit, then we will not finish like we began. Eugene Peterson says, "We are out of touch with reality when we need someone else or some thing—circumcision? a baptismal certificate? a bumper sticker? a pectoral cross?—to verify our existence" (*Traveling Light*, 88).

When I came to Christ, a friend gave me a cross and chain to wear around my neck. I wore it as a symbol of what God had done in my life, a reminder to me of the transformation that had taken place in my spirit. After

some time had gone by, however, the cross seemed to take on a different significance. When I put it around my neck in the morning, no longer was it a sign of God's grace, but a sign that God was with me. If I forgot to put it on, I felt I was in for a bad day. One day I lost it. I was devastated. I felt I would never again have God in my life and that everything would go wrong. But, of course, nothing could be further from the truth. God was still with me. I even began to see that his hand probably was behind my losing that cross. How often we find our Christian lives drifting from reliance on God alone to dependence on other, external things as we seek to complete in the flesh what he began in the Spirit.

Christian freedom is maintained by keeping in step with the Spirit. This requires constant evaluation, because it is easy to drift off course.

Now we come to Paul's fourth question. He asks: "Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain?" The apostle is asking, "Have you undergone a change in values?" When they began their walk with Christ, they valued the cross. They valued things like persecution, suffering, and relationships. They were willing to die for Christ. We have already seen that part of the seduction of the Galatian Christians was that the Jewish identity marks, those owned and recommended by the agitators and troublemakers, brought political safety for their bearers. But now they were beginning to think they could, without cost, live lives that were pleasing to God. They were valuing ease and comfort more than the cross. Paul is implying that if they sought to finish the race in the flesh, then the things they had endured and suffered in the Spirit would have gone for naught.

The principle raised by Paul's question is this: Christians maintain their freedom by keeping sight of their values. False values lead to empty lives.

It is amazing what can happen to us when we begin to take our lives back from God. We imagine that if we can perform works of law for part of the time, then we can live the way we would like the rest of the time. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We think we can live self-centered lives and fool everyone, including God, by maintaining the Torah identity marks — attending Bible study, using the right terminology, appearing to be concerned about others but not setting aside the time to meet with them, etc. That, says Paul, is living in vain. What happened to our values? What happened to the times when we used to stay up all night and pray for someone to come to Christ? What happened to the times when we would refuse to compromise? What happened to the times when we faced rejection because we stood on the cross of Christ? Torah can change our values, because Torah is accepted by society. But it would be a tragic thing if, after years of Christian joy and suffering, we failed to finish the course. Christian freedom is guarded with healthy values: worship, relationships, forgiveness, salvation.

This brings us to Paul's final question: "Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" In other words, was it works of law or hearing with faith that caused God to provide (supply) the Spirit and work miracles in your life? This is a similar question to the one the apostle asked in verse 2. However, here the subject switches to God, the one who supplies the Spirit and the one who works with power to transform the inner

man.

“Provide” means “to be filled with gaiety.” The root word is “dance,” combined with “lead.” The word came to mean “to defray the cost of a dance,” and then, metaphorically, “to furnish abundantly” — in other words, to throw a lavish, celebrative dance. What this implies is that there is plenitude with God. Paul is implying that the Galatians had experienced the abundant supply of God: Spirit, miracles, transformation. All of this had been received through faith, not law.

Christian freedom is maintained by remembering that God is the source of life and transformation, and that all of this comes to believers as a gift. Remembering this will help us to continue to live by faith and not resort to law.

This critical issue centers on our understanding of the nature of the Father and what causes him to respond to us. What prompted God to supply his Spirit to us in abundance? Did we work for it? No. Did we deserve it? No. It was based solely on God’s grace. Nothing we did in the past prompted God to work miracles in our behalf, so it is logical to conclude that there is nothing we can do to make God act graciously in our behalf in the future. When we are living under law, however, we begin to regard God as a stingy father who has to be manipulated to give to us, rather than a gracious Father who meets all of our needs abundantly in Christ.

What this question really deals with is motivation, why we do what we do. We perform works of law because we are bewitched into thinking that we are not accepted by God. We perform religious activity so that God will grace us. We stop asking and start doing instead. This in turn leads to false motivation — pleasing others, gaining prominence, acquiring reputation. But if we understand that

God is the source of life, that he is the one who supplies out of his grace, with abundance, then we are free to glorify, honor and serve him. The whole of the Christian life is a response to the love exhibited in the death of the Son of God for men; and the essential ingredient to freedom comes from understanding God’s character.

How do you measure up on this evaluation? Are you free from the control of law-based relationships, or are you sitting in the cage with the door wide open?

Is your focus on Christ or are you being bewitched by the master deceiver?

Did you begin with the Spirit?

Are you now trying to complete the process by yourself, through the flesh?

Have your values changed?

Do you see God as a gracious giver and your life loving response to him?

These are common-sense, simple questions. None of us can claim to have met the ideal. But let’s be honest with ourselves, no matter how painful that might be. If we are willing to be honest, then we can claim the freedom that is ours in Christ. We can take to flight and leave the cage behind.

My own search for freedom began when I became willing to do this evaluation. Even though I could do a lot of apparently “good” things, I was hiding behind legalism. The door to freedom was wide open, but I was in a cage. I had to be willing to be honest, to admit that something in my life was not right, that God’s Spirit was not controlling my life. An honest evaluation: there is no better place to begin a spiritual journey.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# THE KEY TO FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 974  
Galatians 3:25–4:7  
Seventh Message  
John Hanneman  
July 31st, 1994

A popular song sung by Reba McEntire expresses a child's desire for a father's love and acceptance:

The greatest man I never knew  
Lived just down the hall  
And everyday we said hello  
But never touched at all  
He was in his paper  
I was in my room  
How was I to know he thought I hung the moon

The greatest man I never knew  
Came home late every night  
He never had too much to say  
Too much was on his mind  
I never really knew him  
and now it seems so sad  
Everything he gave to us took all he had

Then the days turned into years  
And the memories to black and white  
He grew cold like an old winter wind  
Blowing across my life

The greatest words I never heard  
I guess I'll never hear  
The man I thought would never die  
S'been dead almost a year  
He was good at business  
But there was business left to do  
He never said he loved me  
Guess he thought I knew

The power of a father's love is an awesome thing. A proper understanding of this truth is the key to experiencing freedom in Christ.

During the past six Sundays, we have learned much about this freedom that Christians possess. Today, we reach the end of our studies in Galatians for the time being. We have not arrived a point where there is a natural break in the text, so there are yet many unanswered questions. But, now that we have begun to think about freedom, I don't want to leave us hanging, so I have decided to give you the bottom line today. I am going to skip to the end of chapter 3 (something unheard of in the annals of PBC!). What I want to do is to give you the focal point of the book, and the key, foundational truth to understanding Christian freedom.

To say that I have been excitedly looking forward to teaching this text is an understatement. I feel that my whole life has been geared toward teaching this one truth today. This message will finish something I began a long time ago. So when I have finished this morning, I will be

expendable (not that I already wasn't!). I pray that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts to this powerful truth. I hope I can communicate even one tenth of what I myself have seen and experienced.

We have already learned what living under law involves. Living under law, we determined, is being controlled by anything other than the Holy Spirit. The primary issue with living this way is control. This manifests itself in various ways. In Galatia, we saw that the law that was being pushed by the troublemakers involved what we have called Jewish identity markers: circumcision, holy days, foods, etc. Today, Christians make laws about worship, dress, ministry, Bible study, etc., which they then impress upon others. In marriage and in parenting, with respect to law, control is always the issue. We make laws about all kinds of things in order to control others.

But the problem isn't necessarily inherent in the law itself. The problem, technically, is living under what Paul calls the "curse of the law." And the curse of the law is that we feel guilt, shame and failure when we don't do what we think we should be doing, or when we put others under guilt and shame when they don't do what we think they should be doing. For example, reading the Bible is a good thing, but what is important is whether we read our Bibles legalistically or freely. Christian freedom does not imply that we can throw out the law and live any way we like. Rather, freedom means that we do not feel controlled ourselves, or feel the need to control others. (Paul will eventually say that Spirit is to replace Torah in the Christian's life.)

We have also looked at why we are so susceptible to living under law. We saw that the primary issues in Galatia, and in our own lives, are things like acceptance, identity, status, approval. When we don't feel accepted, we try to perform and achieve in order to gain acceptance. We do this in all our relationships: with God, with parents, children, friends, and other Christians. And the way we do it is through keeping Torah — keeping religious or other laws that people impose on us, or laws that we impose on ourselves. But Galatians teaches that we are accepted by God in Christ. There is nothing we can do to gain this; Christ did it all. And there is nothing that we can do or not do that will change our identity in Christ.

Now it is true that we hear a lot about acceptance today, but if we stop there we have not gone far enough; we will not experience true freedom. The book of Galatians goes one step further. It reveals what is behind acceptance, what drives us to seek identity, and why we hunger for approval. What is it we are looking for? This is the most important thing to get right in the Christian life. If we get this right, we will have it all. But if we do not get it right, then things like Bible study, ministry, and striving for ap-

proval will not touch the deepest hunger of our hearts.

With that as background, I will read our text, Galatians 3:25-4:7:

**But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.**

**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, 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 our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal 3:25-4:7, NASB)**

This text forms the very core of the book of Galatians. Everything we have studied so far brings us to this point; everything we will study from now on flows from it. There is more truth in these verses than I can possibly talk about on one Sunday morning, so we will look at these verses again in more detail when we return to our studies.

In verses 26 through 29, Paul sets out three results of our being in Christ: we are "*sons of God*"; we are "*one in Christ*"; we are "*heirs according to promise*." For now, all I want to talk about is one of these results of our being in Christ, the fact that we are "sons of God." When we enter into Christ, we become sons of God. Of course, when I say "son," I mean "daughter" as well. Paul himself says, "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ." The reason we can be free from law is that we are "sons of God."

Notice that the apostle highlights three relationships, namely, child, slave, and son. (David Eckman was very helpful in pointing out this to me.) First, this word "child." A child is one who is in need of protection and patronizing. The Greeks deemed a child to be one between the ages of 1 and 10. (The term was also used of the unprotected orphan.) Paul uses this word so as to emphasize vulnerability and the need for growth. In Ephesians, he refers to "children being tossed to and fro by changing doctrines." In 1 Corinthians, he uses the term with regard to simple speaking and teaching and setting aside immature and childish things. A child is "under law," under guardians and managers, until he reaches the time set by his father to become an adult son. In this a child is no different than a slave. Even though he is an heir by promise, he is not yet in an heir in his experience, because he is still a child.

In Paul's analogy, the child is the Jew under Torah. It was the law that protected the Jews and shepherded them through their growing up years. But as long as the Jew is under Torah, he is no different than a Gentile even though he possesses all the heritage of the Old Testament. He has the promise, but not yet the experience. Rather, he is under

the "elemental things of the world."

The Greek word that is used for "elemental things" (rudimentary principles) has two meanings. First, it can refer to the letters of the alphabet learned at school, i.e., first principles (Heb. 5:12). Second, it can refer to the elementary, physical elements of the universe (2 Pet. 3:10, 12), things like earth, fire, air and water, or heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon and stars. This second meaning seems to fit 4:8, which speaks of being in bondage to beings "which by nature are no gods," but demons or evil spirits. (The devil has taken that which is good and twisted it in order to enslave men and women.) Here Paul links Torah with the simple, oppressive principles of this world. Many commentators think that the apostle felt these things were demonically energized. Returning to Torah, then, is like being enslaved to idols. The term "child" implies that Christians are to reach adulthood. The analogy indicates tragedy if we remain as children and fail to experience sonship.

The second relationship mentioned by Paul is that of a slave. In the apostle's day, slaves lived in fear. "The spirit of slavery is fear" (Rom. 8:15). A slave had no rights. His master could torture, kill, shame and humiliate him with impunity. A slave could not represent himself in a legal action; he had to be represented by his master. He was subject to having a hand laid upon him by anybody. In other words, he was subject to seizure and arrest. A slave could not do what he wished, but had to do what the master ordered. In order to be released from slavery, he had to be sold to a god; and both the owner and the slave had to agree to this arrangement.

Torah, law, is similar to the orders of a master to a slave in that it has to be obeyed blindly and well. The appeal is to the will, never to the heart. Law produces fear and captivity, the opposite of freedom. In Paul's analogy, the Gentiles were like slaves. They were in the house, but unlike the child, they had no future hope of becoming an heir. In verse 8, the apostle says the Gentiles were "slaves to those which by nature are no gods." These Gentiles had come to Christ, but if they put themselves under Torah, they were becoming slaves to the "elemental things" once more.

Notice that Paul uses "Torah" and "elemental things of the world" interchangeably. It makes no difference whether one is a child under Torah or a slave under "elemental things"; both the Christian and the non-Christian are under law. Neither the slave nor the child experiences freedom; neither enjoys the type of relationship that God wants him to have.

The third relationship mentioned by Paul, that of an adult son, is the one that God desires for us. It is a relationship of freedom, of being neither child nor slave, but an adult son. Paul uses the word "son," and the phrase "adoption as sons," or sonship. Sonship is the heart of the gospel. It is not a legal, but rather a family relationship: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. It is not a relationship of fear, but one of affection.

In the Roman world, "son-placing" was a ceremony in which a child received a change in status from child to adult. It was a notable day in his life when a child became a man, an adult son. He would receive a new toga, signifying his new status. (This ceremony was also used by Roman emperors who adopted men other than blood rela-

tives to succeed them in authority. Following the ceremony, the new son had the same rights as any child born in the home.) Paul says that this is the relationship Christians now have as a result of their being in Christ.

Notice how the apostle describes this new relationship. First, the event: "God sent forth His Son...God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son." Second, the timing: "now that faith has come," "when the fullness of the time came." Third, the results: We are no longer under the tutor, the guardian of Torah (3:25); we are clothed with Christ (3:27). (The reference may be to the *toga virilis*, which a boy would put on during the sonship ceremony.) Christ redeemed those who were under Torah that we might receive the adoption as sons (4:5). Because of God's Spirit, we have intimacy with the Father, and we can address him as "Abba, Father" (4:6). "Abba" is the word Jesus himself used in intimate prayer to God. "When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16). Thus, God's purpose was not only to secure our sonship by his Son, but to assure us of it by his Spirit. Eugene Peterson comments: "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 finally, we are "no longer a slave but a son and...an heir through God" (4:7).

And what was the means to our adoption as sons? Paul says it was "through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:26). There is no other qualification, no formula, no extra condition. It is by faith in Christ that both a child and a slave, both Jew and Greek, become sons. 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 he sent his Spirit that we might have an experience of it. John Stott comments: "So the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ and 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" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 106).

This is what the story of the prodigal son illustrates in such a powerful way. The parable describes a father and his two lost sons. One was lost in the house, the other was lost outside the house. The son in the house was like the child: he had never experienced sonship, even though he was heir to everything. The prodigal left the home and became like a slave. Then he devised a plan to ask if his father would take him back as a slave. But when his father saw him on the horizon, he made him a son, an adult son. He gave him his finest robe, conferring upon him the identity of sonship. But the story doesn't end there. The father had the same desire for the son who had always been with him.

This is the key to becoming free. We must become adult sons of our Father. This is what hits at the deepest hunger of our hearts. This is why teenagers struggle: they want to be recognized as adult sons and daughters, yet the time for law has not yet run its course. And this is why Paul is so harsh and abrupt in his remarks to the Galatians. If anyone would seek to put them under Torah and cancel out their sonship, then, says Paul, "let him be accursed" (1:8). Later

Paul will tell the agitators that if they are so bent on circumcision, then they should castrate themselves! He says this because sonship is the most exalted relationship we can aspire to. The problem with Torah is that it forces us to live as children and slaves.

There will be times when we will come to our Father as his children, and other times when we view ourselves as slaves of Christ, but our primary identity is as a son or daughter of God. If we don't grasp this and begin to live it out in our daily lives, then we will function not out of a sense of freedom, but of law. This is the biggest problem we face as Christians — confusing identity and function. We try to function without a clear sense of our identity. But once we get our sense of identity right, as adult sons and daughters of the Father, then everything will flow out of Spirit. If I truly believe I am a son, then I will do the Father's will. I am an heir to the kingdom. Against such things there is no law. In fact, because I am a son, I will go way beyond the demands of the law. But I will function out of complete and utter freedom.

What form does your relationship with God take? Are you a child, a slave, or a son? Sonship is the essence of freedom, but all too often we live like children or slaves. We may say we are sons and daughters, but we really are not. May God grant that, beginning today, we will begin to see ourselves for who we really are, sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ.

The book of Galatians is the story of my life, and I have already shared part of that with you. Two years ago, as I was studying this book, I began to be honest with myself. I knew what the term "Son of God" meant, but I did not feel like an adult son of God. Another image better described my frame of mind. I felt that if I walked into my Heavenly Father's house, I would not have the freedom to sit down and make myself at home. Rather, I would sneak up the stairs without saying a word, go into my room and close the door.

Why did I feel that way? I did not have a bad home life growing up. Certainly mine was not an abusive home. My parents loved me. But I had a painful ache in my heart ever since I could remember. My brothers were much older than I, so I grew up almost as an only child. My mother was dominant, my father rather passive. From my mother I got rules and regulations. She was the law, the Torah that kept me from my Father's love, and I was a child to that law. My father was indeed the "greatest man I never knew." Everyone who knew him loved him, but I didn't have the deep conversations with him that I longed for. We enjoyed golf and hunting, but there were times when he was absent. I don't remember him being at very many of my baseball games. "Everything he gave to us took all he had," as the song says. When I wrecked the car, "he was in his paper, I was in my room." Hence the law came into play in my life. I used it not only to gain acceptance, but to become a son.

I always sought a close relationship with my brothers since we were not close in age. But that has not been easy. I would travel to see them, but they would do all the talking. When I spoke, they didn't seem interested. Hence the law came into play again in my life. I used it not only to gain acceptance, but to become a brother. I tell people I am

hard to get to know. Is it any wonder?

I started life as a child in my parents' house, but instead of being led to Christ, I became a slave of idols, "those which by nature are no gods." And so I understand being a child and a slave. This was how I grew up.

When I came to Christ, I became a child of God. I had a wonderful honeymoon experience with the Lord, but as I began to work out my new life in this new family, I quickly went back to relating as a child and a slave to law. I found it confusing that I had freedom in Christ in many ways. I wasn't put off by the things that typically trip up some Christians, but I wasn't free because I wasn't a son. It is hard for me to believe that I am a son.

One situation brought all of this to a head. I have told you about how I was under the law when I came to work at PBC. The deep sense of disapproval and lack of acceptance I encountered led me to even greater inner pain, and once again I resorted to the law as the solution. At one point it became clear that I would not be at PBC much longer. Despite my best efforts, there were those who said that I should no longer be here, that perhaps I should no longer even be a pastor. One day I called home and talked to my father. He had never thought much of my being a pastor. (He kept asking when I would get a real job!) He inquired how things were going, and I told him I was having a difficult time. I probably wouldn't be working here much longer, I said. He said something I will never forget: "They just don't know what a great guy they've got." I thought to myself, "Dad, I know you love me, but I never knew what you thought of me." Those were the words I had longed to hear all my life. "How was I to know he thought I hung the moon." At last I felt like a son to my father.

Finally, I reached the same point in my relationship with God. I became honest with God, because I realized that unless I got this right, then I would never be free. And so my prayer became, "Father, I want to feel like a son." I knew I didn't deserve it, but I knew that if I didn't feel like a son, then nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if I kept Torah, if I was involved in ministry, if I avoided sin. I had worked hard at these things for a long time and they didn't minister to the deep longings of my heart.

God forced me to meditate on these verses from Galatians. After some painful months, the dust settled and I began to experience something I had never felt before. Very quietly, but very genuinely, I began to feel like a son of God. It was the most wonderful thing I ever felt in my life. I don't want to mislead you. I don't sense this all the time, every minute. But now I feel that when at last I enter into my Heavenly Father's house, I will want to sit down at the table. There will be two men there, my Heavenly Father and my earthly father, and I will say to both of them, "Hi, Dad." And they will both say to me, "How are doing, son?"

In 1973, I became a child of God, and in 1993, I became a son of God.

I have learned two very important truths as a result of my journey. First, I now have a great sense of freedom in my relationship to my parents. God never intended that my deep hunger for sonship would be met through my earthly father. My relationship with my father only created that hunger. The whole family structure and the failure that many of us experience are designed to awaken this desire. It was this hunger and desire that kept bringing me back to my relationship with God. God, my Heavenly Father, wanted to fulfill this longing.

The second truth I have learned concerns the great sense of freedom I now have in being a parent. For years I tried to give my children the things I perhaps did not have when I was growing up, so I coached everything from checkers to baseball. Often this resulted not in freedom, but in control. But now I have learned and I am willing to accept the fact that I cannot be everything to them. I can model fatherhood, I can seek over the years to grant them a place as adult sons and daughters, but I would be extremely selfish if I continued to treat them merely as children, because I don't own them. Ultimately my desire is to awaken the hunger of their hearts so that they too might enjoy the same relationship that I have begun to experience with my Heavenly Father.

Our hunger to be approved is really a hunger for sonship with our Heavenly Father. The key to Christian freedom is that the Son has set us free by making us sons. We are sons of God, and because we are in Christ, we hear the Father's voice saying to us, once and for all, "You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased."

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# THE BEGINNINGS OF FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 975  
Galatians 3:6-14  
Eighth Message  
John Hanneman  
November 13th, 1994

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Never smart enough  
Never able to please.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is the beginning of freedom.

©1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# HOW LAW LEADS TO FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 976  
Galatians 3:15-24  
Ninth Message  
John Hanneman  
November 20th, 1994

In our studies in the book of Galatians we have been analyzing the concept of living freely as opposed to living under law. I pray that we will be able to identify the ways in which law operates in our lives so that, by the grace of God, we might learn that true freedom is to be found only in Christ.

That is easier said than done. Like a tangled electrical cord, our emotions are hard to unravel. It is difficult to see how law controls them. Of course, that is what legalism is—emotional control. We know that the way to salvation and freedom is by grace, not law, yet our behavior reflects the fact that we are confused about law, whether it be moral or religious law, or laws that we impose on our families and ourselves.

What is the purpose of the law anyway? we ask. How do law and grace relate? If we are to be free, it is imperative that we understand these issues more fully. These are the questions we will explore today, therefore, as we talk about the priority and the purpose of the law.

First, the priority of the law. We pick up the apostle's argument in chapter 3, verses 15-18:

**Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (3:15-18, NASB)**

Here Paul applies a human, legal principle to the covenant that God made with man. The point he is making is that once a human agreement is made and ratified, no one can alter or annul it.

Perhaps I can illustrate. A few years ago my wife and I signed an agreement to rent a home, with an option to purchase the home after one year. We wanted this clause recorded in the contract to ensure that no one could come in later and buy the property out from under us. When we went to record the option to buy, however, we found that the owner had changed the contract and deleted this part of the agreement. We confronted him, and voided the contract. Thankfully, we got our

deposit back. This is the principle that Paul is talking about. Once an agreement is made, neither party can change it without the consent of the other.

Actually God made two agreements with man, one based on promise, the other on law. Here Paul is explaining the relationship between the two. The first agreement, the promise, was God's idea, and it was based on his character. A promise, we know, is an undertaking in which someone vows to do something. We do not think of a promise as a conditional thing; it is normal to expect people to fulfill their word. If I promise to do something for someone, my promise does not change based on the other person's conduct. Here in Galatians, Paul says that God made certain promises to Abraham and to his descendants, or "seed." This collective noun is referring to one seed, whom the apostle identifies as Christ.

The book of Genesis records these promises. God said to Abraham: "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).

"...all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth then your descendants can also be numbered" (Gen. 13:15-16).

"...one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:4-5).

"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8).

"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (Gen. 17:19).

Thus God made a covenant with Abraham in which he undertook to give him a seed, a land, and a blessing; in other words, an heir, an inheritance, and a heritage. Now the covenant was God's idea; Abraham had nothing to do with it. But Paul says that this promise to Abraham was also given to the seed of Abraham, who was Christ. Christ would come from the line of Abraham, and in this seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. So the promise was not only a promise of land, but also a spiritual promise of salvation, because through the seed, which is Christ, salvation would come. The promise therefore was universal, and it was unifying, in that it did not distinguish between Jew and Gentile.

We find that this promise, this covenant, the fulfillment of which would set things right between God and man, is referred to throughout the entire Old Testament. In Genesis 3, for instance, God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed who was to come would destroy the work of the evil one. God made this promise to Noah: "I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you" (Gen. 9:9). The promise was also made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David. To David, for example, God said: "The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:11-13).

So throughout the OT, the promise is revealed that someone of the seed of Adam, the seed of Noah, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, was coming. This seed, who was Christ, would receive the promise, and he would bless the world. Paul is saying that anyone who is in Christ, therefore, receives the same promises—a family, an identity, an inheritance, a blessing.

Next, the apostle refers to a second arrangement which God made, namely, the law. But he points out that the law was given four hundred and thirty years after the promise was made to Abraham. This arrangement, which was an external set of rules and regulations, was very different from the first; and Israel agreed to live by it. Notice that the law was given only to the Jews; it was not a commitment to bless all the nations of the earth. The apostle's point is that the second agreement, the second covenant, which was given hundreds of years after the original promise was made to Abraham, did not invalidate the first. The original promise, therefore, had a greater priority. We have already seen that a promise cannot be changed once it is given, therefore the law does not nullify the original promise. The promise is primary, the law secondary. The two do not have equal weight or significance.

The point is obvious: God bestows grace on the basis of his promise, not on the basis of man's efforts to obey the law. If grace could be earned by law, that would invalidate the promise, wouldn't it? God's intention all along was that redemption, salvation, would be based on promise and promise alone. He never intended law to replace the promise. Promise, therefore, is God's primary way of relating to man.

Our families teach us this lesson. For example, on my wedding day my wife and I made a covenant with each other. Not long afterwards we found ourselves making laws for our marriage, for ourselves, and for each other, involving things like how we would keep house, share responsibilities, etc. More often than not, however, we ignored these "laws" which we made for each other. The fact that we did not meet them did not nullify the original promise that we made to each other on our wedding day, however. That is because our commitment to one another is based not on law or on performance, but on promise. I can tell you that it is a wonderful thing to be in love after twenty years of marriage. If our relationship had been based on law, however, then we would not have experienced the blessing of promise.

The same thing is true with my children. Children need laws, discipline, boundaries—things like television programs they can watch, curfews, approved friendships, etc. My experience has been that the laws that my wife and I established were tested and broken at times. Yet my love and my commitment to my children has never changed, even when they violated the laws that I imposed. Why? It is because I am committed to them, based on promise, not on performance (although I am sure that I have given them mixed signals in this regard.) My love for them grows and deepens even when they don't measure up, especially when they have violated the laws of our home. This is because my commitment to them is based on promise, not law.

Frequently the problem we have in our relationship with God is the same problem that Israel had: we are confused by law and promise. We become Christians based on promise, and we find ourselves ushered into a glorious new life. We believe, and we are made alive. Our spirits are resurrected from the dead. This transformation brings us joy and freedom. But slowly, that first glow begins to fade. We start having doubts. After a while we begin to act like Israel—we become educated in the law. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, law takes priority over promise. We begin to look to law to mend our hearts. We look to law to find acceptability with God, and approval in church. Law begins to define our relationships. What was once a vibrant life in the Spirit decays into the routine, predictable, boring, listless life of the legalist. What has happened? We have reversed the priorities of law and promise. We forget the promise that we are blessed in the seed, that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law."

God granted life to Abraham based on promise, and

he grants it to us by means of the same promise. That will always be God's primary way of relating to us.

So if the law creates so many problems, why did God give it to Israel in the first place? In verses 19-20, Paul reveals three reasons for the law.

**Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. Now one mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. (3:19-20)**

According to Paul, the law was given for a certain season—until Christ came. It was intended to be a temporary measure. It was “added because of transgressions.” The apostle is saying that the law was given, first, to expose sin, to make transgressions visible. The law does not deal with the root problem of sin; it is merely a stop-gap measure. Obviously, the apostle is referring to moral issues, not things like circumcision and holy days.

How then does the law operate? Let me give you an example. Say you are driving down the street and you see a policeman, what is the first thing you do? You immediately look at your speedometer, don't you? You were not even thinking about breaking the speed limit, or committing some other infraction, but the law tells you that you are doing something illegal. (If it was exceeding the speed limit, we are quick justify ourselves by saying that the limit should be higher.) Here is another example of how the law operates. You are reading something in the Bible about gossip, and suddenly you are convicted about a conversation you had in the morning; or you are listening to a tape on sexual purity, and suddenly you are forced you to deal with your lustful thoughts. That is the function of the law—to expose sin. Although we are not under law, still the law actually works in this way in the life of a Christian. It doesn't fix the problem; it merely reveals it.

Note that Paul makes a very interesting comment on how promise and law were given. Paul says that the law came through a mediator, who was Moses. Mediation demands at least two parties; one cannot mediate on behalf of one party. And not only was a mediator involved, angels were, too. So the law came from God, to angels, to Moses, to man. Here Paul is implying that the law is inferior to the promise, since the promise was spoken directly by God to Abraham (there was no angelic intervention, and no human mediation). The promise was a one-party agreement, while the law was a two-party agreement.

Another interesting implication here is that God is one. F.F. Bruce comments: “The one God is God of Jews and Gentiles alike. The law divided them; the gospel brings them together. And since the God of Jews and Gentiles is one, it is fitting that he should provide one way of salvation for both—the way of faith” (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Eerdmans, 1982] 179).

Paul asks a second question in verse 21:

**Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (3:21-23)**

Do the law and the promise work against each other and lead us in different directions? Paul's emotional response is, “May it never be!” His logical response is that the law does not contradict the promise, because the law cannot yield righteousness. If the law could make us alive, then righteousness would be through the law and there would be no need for the promise. But the law and the promise are two different things.

Rather, Paul says that the law “imprisons all things under sin.” Here is the second purpose for the law: it not only exposes sin, it keeps sinners in jail—“shutting up all men under sin.” The phrase “shut up” means, “to hem in or coop up, confine, imprison.” The term “hold in custody” means “protect by military guards.” When it is applied to a city, it is used of both keeping the enemy out and shutting in the inhabitants.

In Paul's metaphor the jail is sin, and the warden is the law. The warden is a reminder that there is no way of escape; the sinner is trapped. So rather than being a means of escape, the law is the very thing that demonstrates that sin holds us in its grasp. In effect, the law shows us how desperate and hopeless we are. The law makes the promise more desirable and more indispensable, but it is designed to operate before faith comes.

Recently I received a ticket from the city of San Jose. It was issued for a car I no longer own, because the person who bought my car failed to register it. The law, in effect, is holding me responsible. I want to be free of this problem, but I am being held in custody by the demands of the law. When we are confronted with some area of sin or weakness in our lives, the law confronts us with the reality that we are imprisoned and we cannot deliver ourselves. John Stott wrote: “The function of the law was not to bestow salvation, however, but to convince men of their need of it. To quote Andrew Jukes, ‘Satan would have us to prove ourselves holy by the law, which God gave to prove us sinners’” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 89-90).

Finally, Paul gives a third purpose for the law, in verse 24: the law was designed to lead us to Christ.

**Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. (3:24)**

The word “tutor” here is misleading. “Tutor” implies a teaching role, but that is not the case with the historical use of this term. The “custodian” was a slave who would lead the child to school each day. He was not the

teacher; he was merely a guide and disciplinarian. Often he was harsh to the point of cruelty. (He is usually depicted in ancient drawings with a cane in his hand. See 1 Cor. 4:15, 21). When the child grew up, the custodian was no longer needed. In this metaphor the law is likened to a custodian. It is a temporary arrangement for children until they mature. It does not teach, rather it leads us to the teacher. It was not intended to give life, but to lead us to life—life in Christ.

Thus Paul says that the purpose of the law is three-fold: first, to expose sin; second, to keep us in the prison of sin until we are released by faith; and third, to lead us to Christ. The law is temporary, but the promise is permanent. The law is secondary; the promise is primary. The law prepares us for the promise by forcing us to see our need and reach the age of responsibility. The promise of a seed, and of blessing through that seed, was God's first and only plan for grace, salvation, and redemption. The law was never intended to save us.

John Stott has an excellent word for us here: "Not until the law has bruised and smitten us will we admit our need of the gospel to bind up our wounds. Not until the law has arrested and imprisoned us will we pine for Christ to set us free. Not until the law has condemned and killed us will we call upon Christ for justification and life. Not until the law has driven us to despair of ourselves will we ever believe in Jesus. Not until the law has humbled us even to hell will we turn to the gospel to raise us to heaven" (*Galatians*, 93).

This middle section of Galatians is rather heavy and theological, so let me conclude by giving two points of application from this section of Paul's argument.

First, we are meant to fail, and the law ensures that we will fail. It was never designed to help us find approval or success. No one is justified by means of the law. On the contrary, the law was designed to reveal our utter failure. We were never meant to be perfect. God expects us to fail. Why else would he have given the law? Therefore, our failure is guaranteed.

I don't know about you, but the thought that I don't have to be perfect takes a very heavy load off my back. My wife knows I'm not perfect. My children know it; even my dog knows it. But someone forgot to tell me. The fact that God does not expect me to be perfect is a wonderfully freeing thing. It frees me from striving for perfection. It frees me from pretending I am succeeding when in fact I'm not. It allows me to stop living with the dread fear of failure weighing me down.

If we insist on placing ourselves under law we are doomed to the treadmill of trying to be perfect, trying to achieve, satisfy, and perform. We mistakenly think that if we can succeed in our efforts to obey it, then we will taste life. But this way of living minimizes risk, maximizes security, and stifles freedom. Any formula that prevents failure also prevents freedom. "He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness" (F. O. Mattiessen, quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 97). The law demonstrates that we are not perfect. When we come to place where we can admit our failure, it is then that we become free. The goal is faith, not human perfection.

And second, God wants us to relate to him on the basis of his promises, just as Abraham did. Some of you have a doctorate and you make half a million dollars a year. Others of you struggle to make it through the day. But God allows the law to press heavily upon rich and poor alike until we break at last and admit that we cannot achieve perfection. It is at that point that we no longer need the custodian; we are ready to relate to God on the basis of his promise alone.

When we awake in the morning our first thoughts should be of promise, not law. Our first thoughts should be to consider what God has already done for us, not what we can do for him. Our first thoughts should be that we have life by God's promise; there is nothing we can do to gain it. We have a difficult time accepting this, because the world and the flesh do not operate this way, but the word of God declares this to be true. As Eugene Peterson put it: "we live by faith and failure, by faith and forgiveness, by faith and mercy, by faith and freedom. We do not live successfully. Success imprisons. Success is an unbiblical burden stupidly assumed by prideful persons who reject the risks and perils of faith, preferring to appear right rather than to be human" (*Traveling Light*, 106).

The law is a goad that drives us back to God and to his promises. As it reveals our failures and our sin we are brought into greater intimacy with our Father. We hang our heads in shame and defeat, but then we hear his voice. He runs to us and embraces us. "You foolish child," he whispers, "I love you. And I promise I will always love you."

God does not want us to live by law, but rather to enjoy an intimate relationship with him, based on his promise and his finished work in Christ Jesus. Only when we begin to live like this will we will enter into the joy of true freedom.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# THE RESULTS OF FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 977  
Galatians 3:24-29  
Tenth Message  
John Hanneman  
November 27th, 1994

In elementary school I played the clarinet, and on one occasion had to play a solo in competition. I was nervous, and afraid I would fail. When it was my turn to perform, my worst nightmare came true. My pianist and I got completely out of sync. I stopped playing, and asked the judges if I could begin again. The second time through I played flawlessly. But the damage had been done. I could not erase the mistake I had made. All I wanted was a chance at a fresh start, but it was not to be.

That is what the law does: it exposes our failures and makes us want to start over. Even Dennis the Menace seems to understand the function of law. Just this week I saw that he said this to his friend, "Remember, Joey, we're innocent till mom catches us doing something!" The law always catches us when we do something wrong.

At one time or another, we all wish we could start over. When we do something wrong, like hurt someone we love, have an argument, drink too much, or commit a sexual sin, we wish we could push a reset button, erase what we had done and try again. This pattern continues as long as we seek to live under the law. But the Bible promises something far better than starting over. It says that we can become new people not by trying to be perfect, but by identifying ourselves with Someone who is perfect. That someone is Jesus. If we understand this essential truth about identifying ourselves with him, then we will be liberated from living under the law.

Today we continue our study on freedom, from chapter 3 of the book of Galatians. Last summer, in a message entitled "The Key to Freedom," I touched briefly on verses 24-29, but we will study them in more detail this morning. This text brings us to the very heart of Galatians. Everything we have learned thus far climaxes at this point; everything we will study from now on proceeds from it. These verses, therefore, are critical to understanding the gospel and the freedom that is ours in Christ. Chapter 3, verses 24-29:

**Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are**

**all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.** (Gal 3:24-29, NASB)

There are two ways that we can relate to God. We can relate to him on the basis of his promises, God's word, given by his initiative, or on the basis of law, a code of behavioral expectations that qualifies us for approval. The promise, as we have seen, has priority over the law. Compared to the promise, the law is a temporary, secondary provision. The law has a threefold purpose: to make sin visible, to make us aware that we are imprisoned under its power, and to lead us to Christ. Paul says that the law acts like a custodian, a tutor, which leads to the promise.

We have already seen that in first century times, a custodian was a slave who functioned as guide and disciplinarian for a child. He was not a teacher, but rather one who led the child to the teacher. This was a temporary arrangement. At some point the child would enter maturity and the custodian would no longer be needed. (One would not expect to see a mature adult being led to school by a tutor.) The tutor, therefore, was not the end of the process, but the means to the end. According to Paul, the law is the tutor that leads us to Christ. Once we come to Christ and are justified by faith in him, no longer are we under the control of the tutor, no longer are we under law. The work of the law is finished; it has fulfilled its purpose.

What changed to make this so? In these verses, Paul explains the fundamental changes that occur when Christ enters a life. Christians are no longer under law not because they don't want to be or because they are tired of laboring under law, but because of the work of Christ and the bearing that this has on their entire person. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, and as a result we have a whole new identity that results in complete and permanent freedom.

Our task this morning is to understand three fundamental changes that result from our being set free from the law of sin and death. If we can see these three things in all their glory, then we will live life on a very different level than formerly. The law will simply fade away, overwhelmed by the glorious reality of the promise that is ours in Christ.

Here is the first result of that freedom: we become sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. No longer are we children in need of the guidance and discipline of a custodian; we are sons and daughters of God. The em-

phasis here is on adult sonship. A son or daughter who reaches maturity enters into a free relationship with his or her parents. The relationship is not defined by rules and regulations, control and manipulation, or approval based on performance. That is law. Sonship is a relationship of respect, mutual acceptance, trust and freedom. In a healthy family, both parents and children desire and work toward this kind of relationship. Paul is saying that as Christians we are sons of God, and we have this kind of free relationship with our Father.

According to the apostle, two things happened to bring this about. First, we were “baptized into Christ.” In other words, when we came to faith we were placed into Christ and united with him. The book of Romans says that we were baptized into Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Ephesians declares that we have been raised with Christ and are seated with him at the right hand of God. Baptism is the physical symbol of this union, this cataclysmic spiritual event.

The second thing that occurred in order to bring about our sonship is that we were clothed with Christ. Paul says, “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” This is a reference to the *toga virilis*, the robe that was given by a father to his son during the sonship ceremony, part of the Roman culture, as a sign that he had entered manhood, into adult sonship. We find the same symbol in the story of the prodigal son. When the wayward son returned home, the father dressed him in his best robe, his own garment. In the same way, sonship is granted to the Christian and he is clothed with the garments of Christ. When we are united in baptism with Christ, the Son of God, then we have clothed ourselves with him and we become as he is to his Father.

When I was a child I liked to play dress-up with my cousins, especially at Thanksgiving time. We would go into our grandfather’s closet, pick through his clothes, and parade around for the adults, dressed in grownup clothes. This activity was great fun, but looking back now, it is clear that what we were actually doing was wanting to be seen as adults.

In these beautiful stanzas, the prophet Isaiah describes how we have been clothed with Christ:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord,  
My soul will exult in my God;  
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,  
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,  
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels  
(Isa. 61:10).

Sonship, then, is the first result of our freedom in Christ. As sons, we have an entirely new way of relating to our heavenly Father. We have a new identity, and a new sense of worth. And, despite how we may feel, these will never change. God promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, even though they were long past childbearing age. Isaac, the child of

promise who was born to them, was a miracle child. Jesus, too, was a miracle child. He was born to Mary, a virgin. In the same way, we who were dead in sin by faith become alive in Christ. We were miraculously re-born, becoming part of the promise. We were baptized into the Son, thereby becoming sons of God.

The reason we live under law, as we have already seen, is our need for identity and worth. This is why we try to perform and achieve—to earn our identity. We try to earn it by being a “good” Christian, through our athletic ability, our job title, the kind of home we live in, etc. We are always performing in different areas, living under law, in order to maintain identity. We feed on our children’s success, so we put them under law. But Paul says that in Christ we have an entirely new identity. We are freed from living under law—and the change is permanent.

This truth is the key to freedom, yet it is a difficult spiritual concept to lay hold of. I used to have a hard time believing that I am a son of God. The reason for this, as I shared with you last summer, is that I had difficulty relating as a son in my own family. But when I grasped this truth it made a significant change in my life. This is the one thing that I hold onto more than anything else.

For many years I would wake up in the middle of the night with a deep ache in my heart. I could never quite determine its origin, and law could never remove it. No matter what I did it was still there. At last certain circumstances caused the perfectionist scaffolding which I had constructed around my life to collapse. It was a painful time. Losing my parents was a major part of it. But as the dust settled, one thing became clear, and that was that I am a son of God. This one truth has given me more freedom than anything else in my Christian walk. For several months now I have not felt the intensity of that pain I once experienced, that sense of loneliness at three o’clock in the morning. Instead I have a tremendous feeling of freedom. No magic formula led to this. It was nothing I did. God simply allowed me, by his grace, to begin to believe, not in my head but in my heart, that I am his son. I still have a long way to go; I still have my ups and downs. But even that is okay, because I do not expect to be perfect. By faith I believe that I am a son of God.

The law will never grant us sonship. Sonship comes by the promise of God. This is the first result of our freedom in Christ.

The second result is that Christians are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no longer a distinction of race (Jew or Greek), a distinction of rank (slave or free), or a distinction of sex (male or female).

Not only do we become sons of God, we become one in Christ. Not only do we gain a new identity, we gain a new family. “In Christ we belong not only to God (as His sons) but to each other (as brothers and sisters)” (John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 99). Paul

says that this is a radically new family: it has no racial, sexual, or social distinctions. In the cross, Jesus demolished the dividing wall, the barrier that stood between Jew and Greek. He abolished the law and created a whole new humanity, a new society, one new man. Here we have a redefinition of everything the Israelite held dear. Not only does one lose one's identification with Judaism, if a Jew, one also loses one's identification with humanity as we have known it, for the Christian has been placed "...in a new environment. And that environment was Christ himself, the ultimate Adam" (C.F.D. Moule).

The reason Paul wrote this letter in the first place was that in Galatia, agitators and troublemakers were trying to rebuild the wall and once again create division between Jews and Gentiles. The law is divisive, but the work of Christ is universal; it unifies all believers into one. God promised Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Abraham would be the father of a large family, and his descendants would outnumber the stars of the heavens. When we come to faith in Christ, then we too become part of this promise, for by faith we enter into the family of Abraham. The result is that we have equality of relationships. We are free from the control of others, because we are no better or no worse than anyone else in this new family.

Legalism is divisive, because law insists on making distinctions marked by comparison and competition. This is how the world lives, isn't it? That is why we have the battle of the sexes, barriers between rich and poor, prejudice between black and white, and tension between Republicans and the Democrats. We congregate in our group and throw stones at other groups. Once more, identity is a key factor here. Our need for an elitist identity drives us to separate ourselves, to prove ourselves superior, and in the process seek to control our relationships. But it is not to be so in this family of God. In this family we are one; we belong to one another. In the cross, all distinctions based on class, ethnic background, sex, appearance and intelligence are eliminated. If you view yourself as either superior or inferior to anyone in this family, this is a manifestation of law, not promise.

Let us apply this truth on a couple of different levels. First, the oneness of this family of God should change the way we view the world. When David Bruce was here a few weeks ago he told us about the hatred and prejudice between Protestants and Catholics that was part of growing up in Northern Ireland. The communities there are so segregated, he said, that he did not meet a Catholic until he was 18 years old. After he became a Christian, he found that his hatred and bigotry only increased. Finally he had to deal with this truth that Paul is referring to here, that we are one in Christ Jesus. David had to repent and rethink his view of Catholics. When at last he shared a teaching platform with Catholics, he was chastised publicly in the press. Yet he

knew that he was merely being obedient to this truth. What might this say to us about things like our world view, our view of minorities, our view of women?

Second, we can apply this truth right here in this church, among our own community. Look around you. Do you see brothers and sisters to love, or people to compare yourself with? It is amazing whom God has chosen to make up this family. We are far from perfect, aren't we? Most of us mess up a lot of the time. Yet here we are, the church, the body of Christ, the temple of God. It's astonishing, isn't it? Leon Morris describes the church in these words: "Jesus takes people who sing out of tune or have boots that squeak and all the rest of it, and he makes such commonplace people into the saints of God. Church membership does not mean being a person who qualifies for a place in stained glass windows. It means trusting Christ to save us despite our manifold handicaps" (*Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 37). When we look around do we see people with faults or do we see the saints of God?

Certainly we are still male and female; some get better grades than others; and we don't all make the same amount of money. Still we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, spiritual children of Abraham. God has put us together, a special family, united in Christ. There must be no spiritual distinctions based on physical criteria, no acceptance or rejection of one another based on obedience to law. We are not to exert control or try to manipulate one another. We are brothers and sisters in a special family and we can relate freely without sibling rivalry or competition.

Law cannot create unity and oneness in the church, in marriage, or in families. Unity can only come as a result of promise, and freedom in Christ.

Finally, Paul says the third result of our freedom is that we are seeds of Abraham and heirs according to promise. "...in Christ we belong to God and to each other. In Christ we also belong to Abraham" (Stott, *Galatians*, 101). Again we are taken back to the promise to Abraham that he would have a seed who would be an heir, not Ishmael, but "one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4). The seed was Christ, and Christ was the heir to the kingdom of his Father. When we are baptized into Christ we not only become the seed of Abraham, we not only become sons, we not only have equal relationships, we not only become part of a whole new family, but we become heirs to the kingdom.

This is what Paul declares in Romans, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him" (Rom. 8:16-17). And in Ephesians, he wrote, "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus

through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). This means that we are the sons or daughters of royalty, heirs of a mighty king who has an everlasting kingdom, and we share the full inheritance that he passed down to his offspring. In Jesus we are part of a history and a heritage that is bigger and more glorious than anything we can possibly imagine.

My wife and I visited the East Coast last month to celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary. One of the places we toured was Newport, Rhode Island. We didn't know that Newport was the home to some of the wealthiest families in the country. We saw places like the summer home of the Kennedys, for instance. On mansion row we saw one elaborate estate after another, where people like the Vanderbilts established the thrones to their kingdoms. I had never seen such homes. I wondered what it would be like to live in that kind of a family and be an heir to that kind of heritage.

But Paul says that when we come to Christ, we become part of something much grander and more glorious. Even the royal family of England pales by comparison. In Christ we become part of the heritage and history of the greatest kingdom ever established. And it is not a temporal, material kingdom, but an everlasting one. The law can never grant us to be an heir, no matter how good we are or how much money we have. This comes only by the promise of God.

This was what drove the Jews in Galatia to distraction, and why the gospel was such an offense to them. The thought that Gentiles could become Abraham's offspring, that they could become sons of God and heirs of the kingdom, apart from the Torah and its approval, made their blood boil. That was the reason they delivered up Jesus to be crucified. He ate with tax gatherers and sinners and told them they could be part of the promises of God through faith. He welcomed and accepted them. The Jews were like the older brother of the prodigal who was angry at his father for accepting and embracing his wayward brother. Let it not be so with us. If we live under law and make distinctions between

people, dividing and controlling them, then we become just like those who crucified our Lord, and we deny the cross of Jesus.

These then are the glorious results of freedom: we are sons of God; we are one in Christ; and we are heirs according to promise. Notice the centrality of Christ in these verses:

Verse 26: “in Christ Jesus you are all sons”

Verse 27: “were baptized in Christ”

Verse 27: “clothed yourself with Christ”

Verse 28: “you are all one in Christ Jesus”

Verse 29: “you are of Christ,” i.e. we belong to Christ.

“These, then, are the results of being ‘in Christ,’...in Christ we find ourselves. The unattached become attached. They find their place in eternity (related first and foremost to God as His sons and daughters), in society (related to each other as brothers and sisters in the same family), and in history (related also to the succession of God's people down the ages). This is a three-dimensional attachment which we gain when we are in Christ—in height, breadth and length” (Stott, *Galatians*, 101).

So much for starting over. Starting over is law mentality. Trying to be better people, trying to be better Christians, or batting .750 in law observance won't cut it. That is nothing more than trying to minimize failure. The promise, on the other hand, involves risking, trusting, enjoying. In Christ we become new people. We have a new identity, and we become part of a new humanity. Jesus is the seed and the promise, and in him we too inherit the promise. There are issues of sin that we need to deal with, of course, and we will come to these later in the letter. But first things first. As Christians, we are no longer under law. We are sons of God, one in Christ, heirs of the kingdom. This is where we must begin.

The only issue remaining is faith. Do we believe this? And do we live like we believe it? The law tells us that we are destined to fail, but the promise tells us that we are destined to live.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# 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



# PASSION FOR FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 979  
Galatians 4:12-20  
Twelfth Message  
John Hanneman  
December 11th, 1994

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.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# THE MYSTERY OF FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 980  
Galatians 4:21-31  
Thirteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
December 18th, 1994

Most of us are fascinated by mysteries. We find “whodunits” hard to resist. We start as children by reading books and watching movies about the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew; then we graduate to Sherlock Holmes, Alfred Hitchcock, Perry Mason, Colombo, and Jessica Fletcher. A mystery story by its very nature, of course, involves things that are concealed. Red herrings lead us down the garden path, but uncovering concealed clues makes us want to dig even deeper. Our determination to try and figure out the conclusion before the author reveals it draws us along. Often the mystery concludes with an unexpected ending, an ironic twist that both surprises and delights us.

There are many mysteries in the Bible, some of which have not been thoroughly understood through the ages. In the Old Testament especially, God has concealed clues regarding the mystery of Christ and God’s plan of redemption for both Jews and Gentiles. Throughout its history, Israel missed many of these clues. In fact, even after Christ came the Jews did not understand their OT history.

This morning, our study on freedom in the book of Galatians reveals some interesting if ironic truths regarding the mystery of God’s plan of redemption for the church. In these verses Paul gives the Galatians a history lesson to reveal to them the freedom that was theirs in Christ.

The text opens with a question from the apostle. Chapter 4, verse 21:

**Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?** (Gal 4:21, NASB)

Recall that the context of this letter centers on the fact that the Gentile believers in Galatia were being influenced by Jewish agitators. These troublemakers were trying to force the Christians to live under law, to adopt Jewish identity markers of circumcision, food laws, and holy days. We have already seen that living under law involves placing ourselves under the emotional, physical, or spiritual control of someone or something as opposed to living freely in Christ. And we have seen that we are susceptible to living under law because we want to find an approved identity.

The dynamics of living under law are the same whether we place ourselves under Torah, church rules, laws imposed upon us by our families, or self-imposed requirements. We can live under law in our relationship with God, with our spouses, with our parents, with our families, or in the workplace. The expected dynamic is that we must keep law, we must do something in order to find approval, identity and acceptance. This becomes so insidious that our entire lives are taken over.

The problem with the Galatian believers was that they did not understand the law. They were blind to what they were doing. They were under law, but did not “listen” to

the law, according to Paul. They had been persuaded that their own efforts counted in their salvation and freedom. But everywhere the Scripture identifies the vanity of self-effort. As Dr. Harry Ironside said, “No one hates grace as much as the man who is trying to save himself by his own efforts.”

Christians today are no different. Many of us think we are free, but we are not. Although we insist that we are saved by grace, some of us continue living under law—and we don’t even know it. Our identity is based on performance. We are under law, but we cannot see or hear it. A few years ago I would have denied that I was a legalist. I do not have a problem with most things that could be considered legalistic. But as I began to see in this letter the dynamics of living under law, I discovered how much I actually lived that way.

It is hard for us to discern that we are living under law, and hard to admit it when we discover that we are. What is required, in Paul’s words, is that we “listen to the law,” i.e. we fully understand the word of God.

In order to awaken the Galatians to the danger of losing their freedom in Christ and living under law, Paul gives them a jolt. He recounts a well known Old Testament story. Verses 22-26:

**For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. (4:22-26)**

This OT illustration is key, because one of the Jews’ loudest and proudest boasts was that they were descended from Abraham, the father and founder of their race; therefore they believed they were eternally secure. (See Matt. 3:9 and John 8:31-44.)

We are familiar with this story of Abraham’s two sons, but many of us probably are not well versed in the conclusions that Paul draws from it. God promised a seed to Abraham and Sarah, and he promised to bless all the nations of the earth through this seed. But there was a problem: Sarah was barren. She proposed a solution to her dilemma. She suggested to Abraham that he go in to Hagar, her maid, and have a child through her. Hagar conceived and gave birth to Ishmael, but the birth of this son caused a lot of friction between Sarah and Hagar.

Then, thirteen years later, God told Abraham that he

and Sarah would have a son. Abraham replied that he wished Ishmael could live in God's sight; and Sarah laughed at God's promise. But God was clear: they would have a son, his name would be Isaac, and God's covenant would be with him, not Ishmael. When Abraham was one hundred years old and his wife ninety, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

In verses 22-23, Paul makes two points of historical comparison between these two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. First, they had different mothers. Ishmael was the son of a slave woman; Isaac was the son of a free woman. And each boy took after his mother. Ishmael was born into slavery; Isaac was born into freedom. The Code of Hammurabi, which governed the culture in Abraham's day, stated that the son of a slave woman was a slave. So even though Ishmael was Abraham's son, he was a slave.

The second point of comparison was that these sons were born in different ways and under different circumstances. Ishmael was born "according to flesh." Ishmael was the human solution, man's effort to bring about God's promise. He was born according to nature. Isaac was born through promise. Isaac was the divine solution. He was born contrary to nature (both Abraham and Sarah were well past childbearing age). Isaac's was a supernatural birth, brought about through an exceptional promise of God.

Next, in verses 24-26, Paul makes an allegorical comparison between the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. These women stand for two different covenants. Hagar represents the old covenant, Mount Sinai, the Mosaic Law, which gives birth naturally to slavery; Sarah represents the new covenant through Christ, ratified by his blood, which gives birth supernaturally to freedom. The categories of the old covenant are nature, law, and bondage; the categories of the new covenant are promise, Spirit, and freedom.

Now here comes the ironic twist to the story. According to Paul, the two mothers stand for two different Jerusalems. Hagar represents the present, earthly Jerusalem—physical Israel. Hagar represents Jews living under the old covenant, living in slavery to the law, children who are born out of flesh. Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem from above—believers living free in a new covenant relationship with God, children born out of promise. Physical Israel, physical Jerusalem, corresponds to Hagar, and therefore is a slave under law. Spiritual Israel is now the spiritual seed of Sarah, through Isaac, through Christ. This spiritual seed is the new Jerusalem, the new Zion, God's holy mountain. Paul is saying that to be a physical Jew, a physical seed of Abraham, means nothing. But to be a spiritual seed of Sarah means everything. Being in Christ means that you are already living in the new Jerusalem. No wonder the Jews killed Jesus. Jesus came to fulfill God's promise to Abraham and to usher in a new spiritual order. (See Heb. 12:18-24; Rev. 3:12; 21:2.)

In verse 27, the apostle appeals to Isaiah 54 for his reasoning:

**For it is written,**

**“Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear;  
Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor;  
For more are the children of the desolate  
Than of the one who has a husband.” (4:27)**

The Babylonian exile forms the context of this statement.

This idea of a barren one giving birth is prevalent throughout the Bible. In Babylon, the Jews were barren and unfruitful, but this text articulates God's promise of restoration, a promise that was partially fulfilled when Israel was restored and she reentered the land of Canaan.

But the true fulfillment of this promise is the church, the spiritual seed of Abraham, the children of promise. Sarah was barren and gave birth to Isaac; Israel was barren and gave birth to Jesus, the shoot of Jesse. Then Jesus, the seed of Abraham who had no offspring, gave birth to a multitude of Christians. Christians are born into slavery naturally, and reborn into Jesus supernaturally. The fulfillment of this text then is Christ, who gave birth to the church. The inhabitants of the new Jerusalem are children of promise, not children of the flesh. This image of barrenness is saying that God will act out of promise, that man is completely impotent. God's actions count for everything because God must act supernaturally so that what is physically impossible can come to pass.

The exhortation then is to break forth and shout for joy. God has promised and God has fulfilled. Praise be to God!

What are the implications of this history lesson for us? What bearing does this have on freedom as opposed to living under the law? Paul draws three conclusions, beginning in verse 28:

**And you, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say?**

**“Cast out the bondwoman and her son,  
For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir  
with the son of the free woman.”**

**So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. (4:28-31)**

Here is the first conclusion: Knowing your spiritual parents gives you an unshakable identity that leads to freedom. We are children of promise, not flesh (28); we are children of the free woman, not the slave woman (31).

The Jews claimed Abraham as their father, and therefore they were participants in the blessing promised to Abraham. But it is not enough to claim Abraham as your father. The crucial question is, Who is your mother? If your mother is Hagar, you are an Ishmael, a slave under law. If your mother is Sarah, you are free man or woman.

The reason we can be free is because in Christ we partake of the promise, the seed given to Abraham and Sarah, and as a result we have a new identity. We are free because we are born not of flesh, but of Spirit; we are born into the promise of God. Because I am a son of Abraham and Sarah, I am a son of God. My new identity is the key to freedom. No longer am I under the system of law. No longer do I depend upon law for salvation or acceptability. This is the argument that Paul makes over and over again in chapters 3 and 4 of this letter.

A couple with a four-year-old son brought home their new baby from the hospital. Four-year-olds have an uncanny ability to see, imagine, and trust. The four-year-old said he wanted to talk to the baby by himself. The parents put the baby in the crib, left the room, and shut the door.

But they kept their ear pressed to the door. The little boy leaned over the crib, and said to the baby, "Tell me who you are. Tell me where you came from. Quick, because I am starting to forget."

Living under law makes it easy to forget who we are. Who are you? Where did you come from? Why do you exist? Who were your parents? Who were you before you had a face? If indeed you believe in him, you were hidden in Christ, you were a child of promise. But we forget this because we live under law. This truth is what we need to recapture. Once we know where we came from, then we will know who we are. Our new identity in Christ transports us from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. This is what allows us to look past the visible to the invisible. This is what allows us to live in the heavenly Jerusalem and not the earthly Jerusalem. This is what sets us free from the curse of the law.

Words convey different meanings for different people. For example, when I hear the words "white Christmas," my eyes well up tears, because I remember Christmas as a boy. This word "promise" has helped me greatly. For some reason, the notion of promise penetrates my heart much more than words like "grace," "new covenant," or even the phrase, "God loves you." These concepts may be meaningful for you, but for me the idea of promise carries a special significance. It means my relationship with God, my identity, my acceptance, is based solely on his promise—the promise that he made to Abraham and Sarah, the promise that he made to his Son, the promise that he made to me when I was born again. My faith plugs into this concept. Just as a lamp lights up when the plug is inserted in the wall socket, the idea of promise lights me up, setting me free inside.

As believers in Jesus Christ we are children of promise, just like Isaac.

And this identity dramatically affects the way we live. Ishmael and Isaac are a helpful analogy here. Ishmael is a picture of living under law; Isaac is a picture of living by the promise. The religion of Ishmael is a natural religion—what man can do to save himself. But the religion of Isaac is a religion of grace—what God has done and continues to do in our behalf. The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves to be acceptable; the Isaacs of this world trust only in God through Jesus Christ. The Ishmaels live in bondage, because that is what self-reliance leads to; the Isaacs live in freedom, because of the promise of Christ.

Eugene Peterson put it this way:

[This is] a story about the freedom that comes when we trust God to be in control and the loss of freedom that results when we attempt to take control ourselves... one son was born because God promised, the other son was born because Abraham and Sarah doubted. Ishmael was a product of human impatience, the human trying to do God's work for him; Isaac was the result of God doing his own work in his own time. Ishmael caused nothing but trouble; Isaac continued in the faithful covenant of the freely loving God. The great disaster of Abraham's life was that he used Hagar to get what he thought God wanted for him; the great achievement of his life was what God did for him apart from any programs or plans that he put into action...The moment we begin manipulating lives in order to get control of circumstances, we

become enslaved in our own plans, tangled up in our own red tape, and have to live with grievous, unintended consequences (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 130-131).

Law and promise, therefore, are two very different ways of living. We allow ourselves to be controlled by law because we crave identity and acceptance. This is the leverage point that others use in controlling us or that determines our need to try and control others. We desire someone's approval or acceptance, and as a result we either live under their control or we try to control them. Living under law is an Ishmael-like existence, because law is the human solution to God's promise, the human solution to freedom, acceptance, and identity. We do things that we think will give us freedom, but they result in slavery. As long as the leverage point is there we will be under law in our relationships. But if the leverage point is no longer there, then we will be free from control. Freedom is removing the leverage point, in other words. Freedom is being an Isaac. It is believing the promise of God and living with the identity that he gives us in Christ, as children of promise.

If I am ministering in the church to find approval, I am ministering under law. If I am trying to control my wife to gain affection, that is law. If my mood is controlled by how well my child does in school or performs in sports, then I am under law. But if I believe and trust my new identity in Christ, then I live in freedom.

We are either Ishmaels or Isaacs, children of slavery or children of promise. Grasping an Isaac-like spirituality gives us unshakable identity and freedom.

Here is Paul's second conclusion. If we have an Isaac identity, then we can expect persecution and struggle (see verse 29). Historically, Ishmael "mocked" Isaac. We read in Genesis 21:8-9: "And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking." The word "mocking" has the idea of laughter, either because of joy or skepticism. In the stronger Hebrew form, the form that is used in this text in Genesis, the mocking referred to may be positive, as in play and sport, or negative, as in derision. Ironically, this word comes from the same root as the name Isaac, conveyed upon Isaac when Sarah exclaimed, "God has made laughter for me, so that all who hear will laugh with me" (Gen 21:6). Ishmael was a continual source of persecution and mocking to Isaac.

Paul says that just as that was the case then, "so it is now also" (29). Freedom will always be subject to persecution by law. The promise will always be attacked by those living in slavery. And the persecution of the true church does not come solely from the world, from unrelated strangers. It comes from our half-brothers, the religious people, the traditionalists, the orthodox. John Stott says, "The greatest enemies of the evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, who when they hear the gospel often embrace it, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy. Isaac is always mocked and persecuted by Ishmael" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 127).

The ultimate example of this persecution, of course, is Jesus. The sons of slavery, Jews living under law, put to death the Son of promise. Certainly in the context of Gala-

tians, Paul was being mocked by the agitators. The apostle is telling the Galatians that they too will be mocked. And this has been the case down through the centuries. The great Protestant reformers paid dearly for proclaiming freedom in Christ from the established church.

If you are going to be an Isaac, then you must expect conflict. Your freedom will ruffle feathers, and you will be mocked. You may laugh, but they will mock. If you are committed to living freely in Christ, then those who are in bondage to law will be angry at your freedom and will want to shut you up under law. This kind of persecution often occurs in families when one member becomes a Christian and forsakes the family's religious background.

Finally, says Paul, maintaining an Isaac identity demands drastic action. He writes, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman" (30). The Jews interpreted this Scripture to say that God had rejected the Gentiles. But here Paul boldly reverses their interpretation and applies it to the exclusion of unbelieving Jews from the inheritance. J. B. Lightfoot comments: "the Apostle thus confidently sounds the death-knell of Judaism" (quoted by Stott, *Galatians*, 128).

The reason for throwing out the female slave and her son is that Ishmael would not be an heir. It was Isaac who received the inheritance, not his half-brother Ishmael. "Such, then, is the double lot of 'Isaacs'—the pain of persecution on the one hand and the privilege of inheritance on the other" (Stott, *Galatians*, 128).

We are either Isaacs or Ishmaels. We cannot be both. And ridding ourselves of our Ishmael complex and embracing our inheritance often requires drastic action.

Freedom is a gift of God. We can never achieve it on our own. But it does not come easily. It does not come through a slight rearrangement of our schedules. It comes only through radically casting away the system or identity to which we are attached. We cannot have a deep sense of freedom and still hold onto time-honored legalism and world-directed religion. Our views of God and of ourselves have to be drastically changed. That is the radical nature of this history lesson about Hagar and Sarah. It takes courage to see things the way they really are and to cast off those things that bind us.

But freedom also requires that we embrace the new. Paul says that the Jerusalem from above is free, and that is where we are to live right now. The physical is gone, the spiritual is here. The church is called to enter into the heavenly city that is already, but not yet.

Here is how the book of Isaiah puts it:

"Lift up your eyes round about, and see  
They all gather together, they come to you  
Your sons will come from afar,  
And your daughters will be carried in the arms"  
(Isa 60:4).

People from all the nations, an international community, not just Israel or the United States, are gathering right now at the heavenly city. God is calling out sons and daughters from all humanity, children of promise, believers in Christ, to enter his holy city and glorify his name.

Certainly Christmas is a time when we desire to cast off the old and enter into the new. Many of you are making plans to be with your families. These can be joyful occasions, but they can be marred by law, i.e. by control. My wife and I have some family members coming to celebrate with us. One morning last week we were already beginning to feel tense, and so we prayed that we could be free to serve them. At school later that day, God laid it on my wife's heart to invite a young French couple to Christmas dinner. They have no family here, and the young woman has just suffered a miscarriage. She was overjoyed at the invitation, and our children are delighted to have an opportunity to serve. This is just a small thing, but this is how we enter into the promise.

In Christ, we are no longer tied to the constraints of the past, the things that bound us year after year. God has called us to freedom, to live out the promise and enter into what he is doing through his Spirit. This may result in your crossing spiritual and physical boundaries that you never thought you would dare cross, but you can boldly enter in because of your new identity in Christ.

What a wonderful introduction this text makes for the Christmas story! Jesus was the seed of Abraham, the seed of Isaac, the Child of promise. He was the one who came out of barren Israel, the root of Jesse who allows us to rejoice, to break forth and shout, to come to the holy city and sing the praises of our glorious God. The Jews did not recognize who Jesus was because they did not have their history right. The world today still does not understand him, either. It is because they have ignored the clues. Man has reinterpreted history to make Jesus what man wants him to be, not who he really is.

But Christmas reminds us who we are. Christmas reminds us that we are no longer natural, but supernatural. Christmas reminds us that we are sons and daughters of promise, not slaves in bondage. Christmas reminds us that we are Isaacs, not Ishmaels. Christmas reminds us that we are citizens of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, holy Zion. Christmas reminds us that we are free. "If the son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed."

May we experience in full measure the freedom that is ours in Christ this holiday season, as we celebrate the long-promised birth of God's Son.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# CHOOSING FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 981  
Galatians 5:1-12  
Fourteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
April 30th, 1995

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.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# THE PURPOSE OF FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 982  
Galatians 5:13-15  
Fifteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
May 7th, 1995

Our dog Molly is a large, friendly golden retriever. We like to take her to the park, unleash her and watch as she gallops gleefully across the grass at full speed. But there is always a risk when we grant her freedom to run. Will she get into trouble? Will she attack the children playing in the sand pile? Will her friendliness anger the owner of another dog? Can we let go of the controls and trust that everything will be all right?

The theme of the book of Galatians is that in Christ, Christians are set free from the law, free from rules that define behavior and from seeking to be approved through their own efforts. As the apostle Paul put it, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (5:1). Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law. The leash of the law has been removed, as it were, and now we can run the race with joy.

But there is a risk inherent in this freedom. If we let go of the controls that tell us what to do and how to do it, isn't there a danger that things will get out of control? If freedom is practiced in the church and people stop trying to exert control over the lives of others (which they maintain they do in their best interests, of course) won't everything fall apart? Won't people take advantage of their new-found freedom? Albert Camus said, "Liberty is dangerous, as hard to get along with as it is exciting" (quoted by E. Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 149). Eugene Patterson had this to say about freedom, "We cannot domesticate freedom. There are unpredictable energies in it that are of its very essence. If we are going to have the deep excitements of freedom, we also will have to live with the risks of freedom" (*Traveling Light*, 150).

In our study in Galatians 5 today, we begin at last to address this critical question relating to freedom in Christ: If we practice Christian freedom, how are we going to control sin? To put it another way, if we proclaim Christian freedom, will anarchy result? When we talk about freedom from the law, will Christians interpret this to mean they have freedom to sin? And how can we become holy if we don't live under law? Many of you began to ponder this as soon as we started talking about freedom. This is the apparent dilemma that keeps some churches under law and keeps Christians from the glorious freedom that God has granted them in Christ.

In order to answer these questions it is important to first understand why God has set Christians free from the law. If God has called us to freedom, then he must have some divine purpose in mind. Once we understand this purpose we will see what we are free from, and also what we are free to do. (In subsequent studies we will talk more about how to live lives that are holy, but for this morning the spotlight is on the purpose behind freedom.)

Our text is Galatians 5:13-15:

**For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.** (Gal 5:13-15, NASB)

These verses address the following three things: the misuse of freedom; the proper use of freedom; and a warning concerning freedom.

First, the misuse of freedom. As we have already seen, the freedom that we have been talking about in these studies is the freedom from living under law, from performing in order to gain approval, which is often characteristic of our relationships. Paul begins by making an assumption: "you were called to freedom," he says. He has used this word "call" thus far in this book to describe God's actions in calling both himself and the Galatians into a relationship with him. But we are not only called into relationship with God, we are called to live free lives. Freedom therefore does not originate with us; it is the divine call of God.

Then Paul states what this freedom does not permit: it is not to be used as "an opportunity for the flesh." The flesh, according to John Stott, is, "our fallen human nature, which we inherited from our parents and they inherited from theirs, and which is twisted with self-centeredness and therefore prone to sin" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 140). The flesh is the hangover that all of us inherited from Adam. The word "opportunity" was used in those days in a military context to describe a place from which an offensive could be launched, a base of operations, i.e. a vantage-ground. Paul is saying that our freedom in Christ is not to be used as a pretext for self-indulgence, a launching pad for sin. The misuse of freedom is license.

Notice that verse 13 here is patterned after verse 1 of chapter 5. Both verses remind us of our freedom in Christ, and both give an exhortation. Verse 1 reminds us of our freedom and exhorts us to not fall into legalism; verse 13 reminds us of our freedom and exhorts us to not fall into license. These are the two dangers which we face with regard to our freedom, the two fronts on which we battle to experience our freedom in Christ. The free life in Christ can be compared to driving a car on a road that has a ditch on either side. One ditch is license, the other is legalism. The car is out of alignment, and thus is prone to drift to one side or the other. Satan's job, of course, is to push us into one of these extremes. Then, when we realize what we have done, we overcompensate and end up driving into the other ditch. We fight license by becoming legalistic and living by rules. Then we tire of living by rules and failing much of the time, and so we go the other extreme of giving way to sin.

So Paul's concern in verse 13 has to do with license. We have been called to freedom, but we must not let that freedom become a launching pad to indulge our flesh. This would be a gross misunderstanding of why we have been set free. We can illustrate this principle from the vantage point of parenting. The purpose and goal of parenting is to raise children and set them free to experience adulthood, not to hold onto them and control them. If we do not let them go, they won't experience freedom, and we will never enjoy an adult relationship with them. But it is hard to let children go. The world is a dangerous place. We fear they might fall and hurt themselves. Further, we are tempted to withhold freedom lest they run amuck and destroy their lives.

In the same way, God does not give us freedom so that we can engage in sin. As Christians, perhaps we are free to go to movies, but we should not use that freedom as an opportunity to engage in fantasy. In Christ we are free from the manipulation of our parents, but we should not use that freedom as an opportunity to ignore them or be angry towards them. In Christ we can enjoy a nice home or a restful vacation, but we should not use that freedom to store up treasures on earth. In Christ we are free to pursue academic excellence and work hard, but we should not use that freedom to prove ourselves superior to others.

God sets us free, but freedom is not granted that we might indulge the flesh and destroy ourselves.

What is the proper use of freedom then? And why has God called us to freedom? Paul's answer is found in these words from verse 13, "But through love serve one another." In verse 6 he said, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." Love is the ultimate goal of the Christian life. The first commandment is this: Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. This commandment sums up the entire law. This is the same

commandment that Jesus gave to the disciples in the Upper Room: "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The reason we have been set free is to love. "Christian liberty is service not selfishness," says John Stott (*Galatians*, 142). Lord Acton said, "Freedom is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought."

Notice that Paul makes an important assumption in the words "one another." He assumes that we will live in community with others. Freedom cannot be experienced in isolation. It is only in community with others that the Christian attains to freedom. The community and family in which we find ourselves should not be viewed as an opportunity for the flesh, but rather an opportunity to express our freedom in love. The community becomes the soil in which the roots of our free life take root and grow.

And God wants us to grow so that we love out of freedom and not serve out of duty. The law will not help us accomplish this ultimate goal. Our efforts to do so may look good, but they will not spring from a love that is based on freedom. Legalism inhibits love. When we are controlled by law, by performance, and by our preoccupation with seeking approval, we will not be free to love. We will be loving so that we might receive love and approval in return. But no amount of law keeping will transform a selfish heart to a loving heart or a bound-up spirit to a free spirit. Freedom is possible only in Christ, through his Spirit. And this is why God has set us free—that in community and in relationships we might express and experience a love that is free from all taint of legalism.

Some have to learn this lesson the hard way. Last fall, my wife and I visited New York City to celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary. One evening while we were returning to our hotel we passed a woman who was lying on the sidewalk. The only thing covering her body was a garbage bag. We had already seen many homeless people lying in the streets and, as terrible as the sight of this woman was, we kept walking. A few minutes later, my wife said to me, "God told me to do something." I winced. "What is it?" I asked. She said she wanted to buy a sweatshirt for the woman. I replied that it was late at night and I didn't feel safe on the streets of New York. We had a passionate discussion and, as the emotional dynamics of our relationship came to the surface, it became obvious that the issue was one of control. The issue was legalism, not the woman in need. At last I relented and we retraced our footsteps, but she was no longer there. The realization struck me like a lightning bolt: I was not free to love.

So, according to Paul, the purpose of freedom is love. Christians are not to be controlled by law or by their emotions. Through our acceptance by the Father in Jesus Christ, we can love with a full heart. This is the kind

of love that is described in the words of Jesus, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Most of us are familiar with the parable of the good Samaritan. On one occasion an expert in the law asked Jesus what he should do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him what was in the law, and the lawyer answered correctly, quoting the great commandment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. But when the man asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told him the parable of the good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite failed to love even though they kept Torah, but the Samaritans loved even though that expression went against every cultural distinction that was his and it might have cost him his own life.

God's unlimited, unconditional love melts away all resentments and anger and makes us free to love beyond the need to please or find approval. Henry Nouwen describes this kind of love in these words: "The leap of faith always means loving without expecting to be loved in return, giving without wanting to receive, inviting without hoping to be invited, holding without asking to be held. And every time I make a little leap, I catch a glimpse of the One who runs out to me and invites me into his joy, the joy in which I can find not only myself, but also my brothers and sisters" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 86). Living under the law does not yield the good Samaritan-kind of love, the Christ kind of love. This is why we have been set free in Christ.

And here is the ironic thing: We become free from living under the law in order that the entire law might be fulfilled in us through Christ. This twist completely silences the advocates of law who are scared of giving people Christian freedom, and does away with the fear that things might spin out of control. The reality is that when we become free to love according to God's purpose we will end up fulfilling the law in a much deeper way. "[Freedom] does not mean that we are free to disregard or disobey the law. On the contrary, although we cannot gain acceptance by keeping the law, yet once we have been accepted we shall keep the law out of love for Him who has accepted us and has given us His Spirit to enable us to keep it" (John Stott, *Galatians*, 143).

Finally, in verse 15 Paul gives a warning concerning our Christian freedom. According to the apostle, if we do not love, if we do not use our freedom properly, then the community will self-destruct. His metaphor is graphic: "if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another." Paul is talking about cannibalism—biting, swallowing, eating and devouring. The result is annihilation, total consumption. Notice again the assumption of community that is expressed by the words, "one another."

If we do not give ourselves to love, things can go in the opposite direction. Efforts to control sin can have

more devastating effects than the sin itself. Rather than building itself up in love, the community feeds one on another. People become critical, judgmental, selfish and complaining, pointing out each other's faults, consuming one another. Such behavior spreads like cancer, destroying healthy cells, and the body dies.

Oftentimes we see this very thing occurring in the church. Brothers and sisters in Christ destroy one another with critical words, and the church divides and ultimately dies. This an apt description also for a family in which love is not expressed. Parents and children, brothers and sisters wage war, holding grudges, tearing one another apart with harsh words. "Freedom that is not expressed in love annihilates: We must love one another, or die" (W.H. Auden, quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 154). Freedom achieves humanity and avoids bestiality only when it is used in acts of love. "Freedom without love," said Ellul, "resembles a blind man without a guide" (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 154).

Let us reflect for a moment now on the glorious purpose behind our freedom to love.

Although there are two sons in the story of the prodigal, the account centers around the love of the father towards both sons and his desire to confer upon them the status of sonship. In our journey towards freedom we have seen that the key thing is grasping our sonship in Christ. However, the journey does not end there. God not only wants us to experience the joy of returning home and being sons, he wants us to become like the father who loved both sons equally, and welcomed them home and called for a celebration. God calls us to spiritual fatherhood. This is the purpose of our freedom.

This makes perfect sense. We can illustrate it from life. A child who is under rules struggles against what he deems to be constraints, but once he becomes a son in the house, he cares for the house in the same manner as his father. A child who becomes a partner in the family business and is no longer an employee cares for the business in the same manner as the father. In the same way, the child of God who becomes a son of God shares the nature and perspective of the Father. And in Christ, we are becoming like the Father. Jesus said, "If you have seen me, then you have seen the Father. The Father and the Son are one." Once we become a son in the Son of God, we also become one with the Father. And just as in adulthood we start looking like our physical mothers and fathers, as we grow spiritually we start looking like our heavenly Father. These stages of maturity are mentioned by John in his first epistle when he writes to little children, to young men (sons), and to fathers.

This is an amazing truth. When I first started to think about this, a book by Henri Nouwen on the prodigal son confirmed my feelings. As I began to experience sonship with the Father, I felt more freedom in my rela-

tionships. My perspective began to change, particularly in my relationships with my wife and children. As the dynamics of emotional control lessened, I not only found freedom, I began to experience freedom to love unconditionally. When I received the Father's love, I sensed I was called to give the Father's love in return. The result is that in recent months I have begun to have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a father.

Living under law is a convenient way to avoid loving like the Father, a convenient way not to risk, sacrifice and die. Fatherhood can be a lonely role at times. A father has to wait for his child's return. He has to listen to the anger of his child without striking back. He hurts but does not retaliate. He loves in the silence of his own heart. We are foolish if we think that we can keep the law and satisfy God without cost to ourselves. We desperately desire freedom, but do we want the freedom to love, do we want to go all the way and become like the Father?

Henri Nouwen has a helpful word in this regard:

Do I want to be like the Father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just

the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?

Isn't there a subtle pressure in both the Church and society to remain a dependent child? Hasn't the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn't our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in childish self-gratification? Who has truly challenged us to liberate ourselves from immature dependencies and to accept the burden of responsible adults? (*Return*, 122).

If we misuse freedom we will end up indulging the flesh. But the very purpose for freedom is that we might love with the love of the Father. If we claim both our sonship and our fatherhood, we won't fear living free from the law.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, let us think about this glorious call to freedom in Christ. We should not feed on one another, as Paul admonishes, but on Christ, his broken body, his shed blood. In Jesus we become sons and daughters of God in order that we might share the fullness of the Father. As we partake of the elements, let us enter into the divine call to love one another. In Jesus, we have the love of the Father. And in him, we can love like the Father.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# THE FREEDOM TO SAY NO

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 983  
Galatians 5:15-26  
Sixteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
May 14th, 1995

In our series in the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians we have been studying the Christian's freedom in Christ in contrast to living under law. We have learned that the reason people live under law is that they might gain approval, love and acceptance through their performance, whether at church, school, work, or in the home. The key to our freedom as Christians, however, is our sonship in Christ—a standing that has been granted to us by God, through grace. As believers in Christ, we are sons and daughters of God; no longer are we to consider ourselves children or slaves.

In our last study we learned that the reason we are free is not that we might rush headlong into sin, but that we might fulfill the law by loving one another. As Christians, we have been set free to love. The question facing us now is, how do we do this? We may well understand Christian freedom on an intellectual and even a theological basis, but how do we work out this freedom on a day to day basis? How will sin be defeated so that we can love in a way that will fulfill the law of Christ?

We find Paul's answer to this question in the familiar passage to which we come this morning, Galatians 5:15-26:

**But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.**

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorceries, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.** (Gal 5:16-26, NASB)

The structure of this passage indicates that these verses are carefully crafted by the apostle. The text contains a number of statements that bracket a center line in the second half of verse 21, which emphasizes the fact that the kingdom of God is different from the kingdom of this world. Observing the text, we note the works of the flesh contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit. Verses 18 and 23 say that if we live in the Spirit, we are not under law; verses 17 and 24 discuss the problem with the flesh and the solution to the flesh; verses 16 and 25 are exhortations to walk by the Spirit. Everything that is said in this text is clearly put in the context of walking in the Spirit. But there is one more bracket: verses 15 and 26 are warnings to the Christian community to not bite and devour one another, and to not become boastful. Notice that the phrase "one another" is repeated four times, stressing the importance of community.

Clearly, the primary exhortation of the text is that Christians walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. The Spirit (mentioned seven times) is the instrument of freedom in our lives; and the manifestation of this freedom is lives that are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. Once the law has led us to Christ, Spirit replaces law, and the Spirit fulfills the law. The exhortation is that the Spirit permeate everything we are and everything we do.

Even though the main principle of this text is obvious, we are going to spend two weeks in this passage. Today we will focus on the negative side of Paul's argument, i.e. his discourse on the flesh; next week we will focus on the positive side of things, i.e. the Spirit. This morning, then, our focus will be on the freedom to say no.

The flesh is the word that Scripture uses to describe mankind's natural, fallen human nature. The lusts of the flesh are not limited to merely illicit sexual desires, but rather, all the sinful desires of our fallen humanity. Every person here this morning has a flesh, and everyone's flesh is ugly. No amount of makeup or designer clothes will change its nature. No matter what kind of car you drive or how beautiful your home is, you cannot mask the fact that your flesh is unpleasant and nasty. Nothing you do will change its basic nature. Eugene Peterson describes the flesh as a "life of passions and desires, a life of impulse and necessity, a life responding to signals from others, a life of captivity to internal compulsions. It is a life that proceeds along well-charted, predictable lines—copying what others do, imitating stereotyped behavior, expressing itself in a few senti-

mentalities mass-produced from the cliché factories of popular culture” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 167-168).

If we are truly going to live out our Christian freedom in love, we are going to have to deal with this manifestation that is called the flesh.

Paul says six things about the flesh that I want to draw our attention to, using a series of statements or principles. The first principle is this: The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to one another. In the words of the apostle, “the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (17). In contrast to the flesh, which we inherited at birth, the Holy Spirit is a gift which is given to us at our conversion. The flesh is who we are by natural birth; the Spirit is who we have become by means of the new birth. And the flesh and Spirit have contrary desires that contend with each other. Just like democracy and communism, or Republicans and Democrats, the Spirit and the flesh oppose one another. And if the flesh is in opposition to the Spirit of God, then it follows that the flesh is in opposition to God himself.

For example, in our text the notion of our loving one another is set in opposition to eating and devouring one another. These are incompatible activities. One is the work of the flesh; the other is what is produced by the Spirit. Paul says that if we are fearful that our freedom will lead to an increase in sin, we should rest assured that the Spirit will oppose the flesh. Freedom will not result in anarchy, in other words.

Here is the second principle: The only thing that can defeat the flesh is the Spirit. The law is powerless to accomplish this. Here and elsewhere the clear teaching of Scripture is that there is a connection between the law and the flesh, and the law cannot control the flesh. The law does not stimulate spirituality; it does not set us free from the law of sin and death. Actually, it has the opposite effect. The law, which is holy and righteous, only serves to stir up the flesh. Paul says that one is “not under law” to contend with the flesh in order to become godly. But if we put ourselves “under law” we won’t be able to accomplish what we desire, for the law is powerless to help us do the right thing.

This truth is obvious. We make laws all the time—laws to lose weight, exercise more, read more, avoid getting angry, etc. But we all know the ineffectiveness of imposing such laws on ourselves or others. We may succeed for awhile, but sooner or later the flesh will come to the fore. Ultimately, the only power one has against the flesh is the Spirit of the living God, not “tablets of clay.” The flesh is like Superman in that it has only one weakness. That weakness is not kryptonite, it is the Holy Spirit. The reason we are exhorted to walk in the Spirit is that if we do not, the flesh will dominate our lives, because law is powerless to control the flesh. Walking in the Spirit becomes the antidote to the possibility that freedom from the law might provide an occa-

sion or opportunity for the flesh.

Recently, a pocket door in my kitchen got stuck in a half-open position. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get it to fully close or open. I asked a young man from our singles group to help me with the problem. He put his hand in a certain place on the door, applied some pressure and, lo and behold, the door was restored to working condition. I smiled to myself as I thought about my studies in Galatians. The door was the flesh, I was the law (I could do nothing to fix it), and my friend was the Spirit: he had the power to fix the door!

This truth, that the only thing that can defeat the flesh is the Spirit, is not merely an exhortation, it supports a powerful argument by the apostle as to why living under the law is of no avail to the Christian. In 3:3, Paul asked: “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” In 2:15 through chapter 4, he argues that the law fails to make us righteous or acceptable before God. Salvation is the work of Christ, and it is one hundred per cent gift. But that is not all. Not only is the law completely ineffective in bringing about salvation, it is utterly ineffective in producing righteous behavior, the sort of behavior that conforms to the character of God now that we are Christians. The reason this is true is that the law is powerless against the flesh—and the flesh is opposed to God. Therefore, living under law in an effort to control sin and produce godliness is futile.

True Christian freedom is found in living under the control of the Holy Spirit. If we are controlled by anything else we will be living under law, because we will be controlled by our flesh, with its passions and desires, and this will draw us away from God and godliness. Having begun with the Spirit, we must realize that the flesh makes it necessary to continue in the Spirit.

Here is the third principle: Manifestations of living according to the flesh are easy to recognize. How do we know when we are living under law? Paul says the signs are obvious: We will manifest in our behavior the works of the flesh. The apostle lists fifteen signs to assist us. This is not a comprehensive list. In other passages, certain behaviors are mentioned that are not mentioned here. But certainly this list is representative.

The fifteen items listed break down into four categories, the first of which deals with inappropriate sexual behavior: “fornication” (any kind of unlawful sexual behavior); “immorality” (impurity); “sensuality” (indecentcy, an open and reckless contempt of propriety).

The second category deals with misplaced worship, false religion: “idolatry” (the brazen worship of other gods); and “sorcery” (the secret tampering with the powers of evil).

The third category has to do with manifestations of an unhealthy society and the breakdown of personal relationships: “enmities” (quarrels); “strife” (a contentious temper); “jealousy” (envy); “anger” (fits of rage);

“selfish ambitions” (temper tantrums, canvassing for office); “dissensions” (factions, party intrigues); “envyings” (jealousies).

The fourth category has to do with alcoholic excess: “drunkenness” and “carousings.”

The fifth category includes “things similar to these” (this list is not exhaustive, in other words).

These, then, are the works of the flesh. This is what the flesh looks like.

Eugene Peterson puts these “works of the flesh” in everyday language, in these words:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive and loveless sex, a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage, frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness, trinket gods, magic-show religion, paranoid loneliness, cutthroat competition, all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants, a brutal temper, an impotence to love or be loved, noisy bickering, small-minded and lop-sided pursuits, a vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival, uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions, ugly parodies of community. I could go on (*Traveling Light*, 149).

The majority of the sins listed, eight out of the fifteen, actually, have to do with the breakdown of relationships. Paul is not dealing so much with internal issues such as lust and covetousness, but rather issues involving community, because freedom is lived out in relationships. And the manifestation of freedom is healthy relationships, while the manifestation of living under law is unhealthy relationships that are dominated by the flesh. Thus it is easy to recognize the activity of the flesh.

The fourth principle is this: At a deeper level, manifestations of the flesh are a signal that something is wrong. When we see the works of the flesh in our behavior, that should tip us off to the fact that we are not experiencing freedom in Christ. Unhealthy relationships are signs that we are under law and that we are looking for our love, approval and acceptance in unhealthy ways. The works of the flesh tell us that we are not experiencing our sonship in Christ, a sense of being home and resting in our Father’s love. Here is how Henri Nouwen put this: “When I forget that voice of the first unconditional love, then these innocent suggestions can easily start dominating my life and pull me into the ‘distant country.’ It is not very hard for me to know when this is happening. Anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms and rivalries are the obvious signs that I have left home” (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 41).

If this is how we act, to compensate for our feelings of lostness, we look to the world and to the Christian community to give us love and approval, the sonship that we so earnestly desire. We live under law in order

to gain our sense of worth, and as a result, addictions replace freedom. We so crave love that we look for it in sexual perversion. We so hunger for it that we become angry with our spouse for not giving us what we want. When we see someone else getting the approval that we desire, we become jealous and resentful. Then we try alcohol to deaden the pain of not being loved or accepted. We deny the pain in our life by seeking to control everyone around us. At last we give up and say, “I’m worthless. I’m no good. I’m a nobody.”

All of these signs are indicators that we are not free, that we are not sons, and that we are trying desperately to find our sonship from this world and from people around us. As long as we remain on this treadmill we will be unsuccessful in the most important search of our life, even as Christians. Only God in Christ can give us the freedom to have healthy relationships.

I see this clearly now in my own life. When I get angry or depressed, I am immediately aware that I am not experiencing my sonship, rather I am trying to get something from someone else, without success. I am living under law and am manifesting the work of the flesh. That is when I need to draw near to the Father, to hear his voice say to me again, “You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased.”

The fifth observation is this: Living according to the flesh is incompatible with who we are as Christians. The center-line of the text is this: “those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (21). Basically, Paul is saying that the flesh belongs to an age of which Christians are no longer a part. This phrase gives us the perspective and the motivation to no longer live under the law, to live “according to the flesh.”

The kingdom of God has already come through Christ and it is available now through the Spirit in the life of believers. It is interesting to note that in Galatians, the law and the flesh are qualified by the same word, “works.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are similar, but it indicates that both categories of work, religious observance and sins of the flesh, belong to the past for those who are in Christ and who “walk according to the Spirit.” The works of the law cannot yield a righteous standing. The works of the flesh cannot yield a righteous character.

Rather, Paul is saying that the works of the flesh describe the behavior of unbelievers. The apostle states that those who “practice” such things, i.e. those who live this way, have no inheritance with God’s people. Both the flesh and the law are part of an age in which the believer no longer lives. The flesh is not just our fallen human nature; rather it is our life before we came to Christ, and a life that is outside of Christ. To live according to the flesh, then, is to live in keeping with the values and desires of life in the present age, a lifestyle that stands in absolute contrast to God and his ways.

Therefore, there is no reason for Christians to live according to this age. That no longer determines our identi-

ty. This world is the kingdom of those who do not believe. Why would we want to live like them? Paul stated at the outset that we have been delivered, or rescued, from this present evil age. Believers in Christ have been separated from this world and are already living in the age to come—the age of the Spirit. We are sons and daughters of the kingdom, heirs in Christ, and we share the nature of the Father through the Spirit. To live according to the flesh is to return to our former life as those who do not believe. To live according to the Spirit is to live in keeping with the values and norms of the coming age that was inaugurated by Christ through his death and resurrection. This truth is paramount, but this is what we continually forget.

It is easy to forget the source of our citizenship and allow the world to define us. It is easy to look to this world, through law and through the flesh, to satisfy our deep hunger for acceptance, love and approval. But Paul is saying that this world has nothing to offer. We don't belong there, so don't look there. It is a waste of time.

The sixth principle is this: The flesh has been crucified, and we must take up our cross daily. What must we do with this powerful force called the flesh? Paul says that it has been crucified with Christ. We must make sure it stays crucified. The verb tense indicates that this is something that we did decisively at the moment of our conversion. We “crucified” everything we knew to be wrong. We took our old self-centered nature, with all its sinful passions and desires, and nailed it to the cross. We must be assured in our minds of this past reality. And we must leave the flesh nailed to the cross. We are called daily to take up this cross and put to death the works of the flesh, to completely and utterly reject it whenever it rears its ugly head.

In order to accomplish this, we need to have an attitude towards the flesh that is consistent with the crucifixion. Let us consider crucifixion for a moment. This form of execution was reserved for the worst criminals. It was an ugly, painful, lingering manner of death. Once a criminal was crucified, death was certain to follow. Soldiers were placed at the scene to guard the victim and prevent anyone from taking him down from the cross until death was confirmed.

In the same way, crucifying our flesh is painful and unpleasant, but we must be harsh and ruthless, for this is godly homicide. We tend to be too kind and gentle with the flesh, because we don't like the sight of blood or the feel of the pain of death. We can keep wistfully returning to the scene of the execution once we have crucified our flesh. We begin to fondle it, to long for its release—to even try and take it down from the cross. We can revive the life of the fleshly desires. We are tempted to breath life back into it, to let it live.

Shortly after I married my wife, I noticed that my old clothes began to disappear from my wardrobe. Occasionally I'd find a piece of my clothing in the garbage, or I'd see a bag filled with my old clothes left out for Goodwill. Even though I might never want to wear a certain item of clothing again, even though it was ugly and out of fashion, I'd get mad at Liz for not asking me before she got rid of it. I'd hold up an old shirt that I'd rescued from the garbage and say, “I love that shirt. I had some good times in it.” I would even try to sneak some of those old things back into my wardrobe.

We act the same way with the flesh. Although it has been crucified, thrown out, and left to die, we keep dragging the stinking, rotten corpse out of the garbage. We say, “I don't want to get rid of that quite yet. I am too fond of it.” We need to learn to leave our ugly flesh crucified on the cross. We must put it to death on a daily basis. As Aldous Huxley said, “‘Our kingdom go’ is the necessary and unavoidable corollary of ‘Thy kingdom come’” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 168).

All of these principles concerning the flesh declare that in Christ we have been set free to say no. Next week we will discuss the work of the Spirit, but we must begin by saying no to the flesh. We must say no to all the voices that seek to tempt and seduce us, the things we once were addicted to in our search for approval. We can say no to this world's acceptance. We can say no to our crucified flesh. We have been set free from this present evil age. We are sons and daughters in God's kingdom, the new age, the new humanity. Everything that we need has been given to us in Christ Jesus. Our part in this is to keep saying no to those things that would drag us back once more to the old order.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





# THE FREEDOM TO SAY YES

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 984  
Galatians 5:15-26  
Seventeenth Message  
John Hanneman  
May 21st, 1995

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is called the *paraclete*, or helper. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside believers and encourages them. He is sent by the Son, and he shares the nature of the Father: he is deity, he is eternal. At the time of creation, God breathed his Spirit into Adam's body, and Adam became a living soul. When we are recreated by God, God breathes his Spirit into us, and we who in Paul's words were "dead in trespasses and sins," become alive to God.

If you are a Christian, then, the Holy Spirit, a divine person, a member of the triune Godhead, is living in you right now. There is a promise of God that is repeated throughout Scripture that says, "I will be with you. I will be your God and you will be my people." This was the promise that was made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It was repeated to Israel for two thousand years, and Jesus proclaimed this ancient pledge to the church when he said to his disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). The Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of this promise.

In Galatians 5, the apostle Paul has much to say about the Holy Spirit and his ministry to believers. We have seen that the message of this book is that Christians have been set free from the law. We are not controlled by the law, but neither are we dominated by the flesh. If we are to experience our freedom in Christ, however, we must understand the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the linch-pin in Paul's argument for Christian freedom.

In our last study we talked about the flesh and the Christian's freedom to say no to its desires. Today we will talk about the Spirit, and our freedom to say yes to his prompting. Our text is the same as last week, Galatians 5:15-26:

**But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.**

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to**

**Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.** (Gal 5:15-26, NASB)

Clearly, the exhortation here is to walk in the Spirit. He is the instrument, the agent of our freedom.

I want to make five observations about the Holy Spirit from this text, expressed in the form of principles. Here is the first observation: The Spirit opposes and subdues the flesh. We mentioned this principle last week, but it is so important it bears repeating. Before we came to Christ, we lived under law in a futile attempt to find acceptance, love and approval. But when we became believers, we found approval in God. We became sons and daughters, and thus were set free from the law. But the flesh remains an obstacle to our living out this freedom on a daily basis. Verse 13 of chapter 5 declares that the purpose of freedom is to love one another, not to give an occasion to the flesh, which would result in anarchy and chaos.

The question that arises then is, what will rein in the flesh and allow us become free to love unconditionally? Paul's answer is, the Holy Spirit. It is not an MBA or a six-figure salary. The apostle argues that we will not be able to do as we might wish, because the Spirit will oppose the flesh so that we will not carry out its desires. Notice in verse 16 that the word "desire" is singular. The desire of the flesh is to find friendship and acceptance from this world, to please self, in other words. But the desire of the Spirit is to take us into the kingdom of God and to empower us to live by an entirely new set of values. Flesh and Spirit thus are incompatible; they belong to different kingdoms. The law does not have power over the flesh, because the law belongs to the present age. But the Spirit does have power over the flesh, because the Spirit belongs to the age to come. The Spirit therefore is perfectly capable of keeping the flesh in check so that the weeds of sin and darkness will not grow out of control in our spiritual garden. Paul does not say that we will never sin, but he maintains that the flesh will not dominate us. We will have the capability to love because of the Spirit's presence within us.

Before I became a Christian, I harbored many erroneous values and beliefs. I wanted to find fulfillment in the things of the world, but I was unsuccessful. When I became a Christian, the love of God was poured out into my heart, and my desires began to change. Why? It was because the Holy Spirit had come into my life and he was opposed to the desire of the flesh. Now I stand opposed to many things that the world embraces. I oppose premarital sex, for instance. I oppose abortion. I oppose humanistic religion. I oppose divorce. And the reason I am opposed to

these things is not because somebody told me to oppose them, because I am under law, because I have aligned myself with a political cause, or that I think I am better than other people. I oppose these things simply because that is what the Spirit does. He opposes the flesh and the values of this world. As Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, therefore, we are guaranteed that we will have an ally to defeat the flesh.

Here is my second observation: The Spirit produces the fruit of godly character. We come now to Paul's conclusion as to why living under law as a Christian is an utterly futile exercise: It cannot make us acceptable to God and give us a right standing with him. But that is not all. Living under the law cannot produce godly character. And that is our goal—that we might become like the Father. Having begun in the Spirit, we must continue in the Spirit. If we are living under the law to effect godliness in life, all we will see are the works of the flesh, as we discussed last week. But, in contrast to the ugly works of the flesh, the Spirit produces good fruit, which the Bible refers to as character.

In these verses Paul lists nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. The list is not comprehensive (as suggested by the words "such things" in verse 23), but representative. Every characteristic in the list, except for self-control, is an attribute of the character of God.

The first of these is *love*. It should not surprise us that love tops the list. Paul has already stated that it is for this reason that we have been set free. The apostle said, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (5:6). As Christians, we experience the love of the Father through the Son, "who loved us and gave himself for us." As we embrace our acceptance as sons, then we are set free to truly love others the way God loves us.

Notice that love stands in direct contrast to the self-centeredness of most of the characteristics on the list of the works of the flesh. Love means having the compassionate heart of the Father, initiating forgiveness, and giving without expecting anything in return—the kind of love that comes from a full, not an empty heart.

*Joy* is the discovery that exuberance and vitality flow freely from God's life into our lives as Christians. Living under the strain and weight of law, however, inhibits and stifles joy. In the story of the prodigal, the father rejoiced over a lost son being found. The older son had not experienced his sonship, and he was resentful and complaining. He could not enter into the father's joy, because joy and resentment cannot exist together. But the presence of the Spirit allows us to enter into the Father's joy, no matter what the circumstances. Henri Nouwen put it this way, "In our world, joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below, joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist in God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the man of sorrows, but also the man of complete joy" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 118).

As a result of the life and death of Christ we have *peace* with God; we have *shalom*, a sense of wholeness and well-being. God works through the disparities and contradictions of our experience and brings them into harmony. Peace also is an attribute of the Christian community. It

stands opposed to the works of the flesh, and in particular the eight manifestations which describe the breakdown of relationships and the resultant discord, strife, anger and divisions. We cannot have peace in community until we know the peace of God individually. As is the case with love, what we receive works itself out into community.

Love, joy, and peace stand together as large, general categories. They describe what we receive from God and what we manifest in our behavior as a result.

*Patience* literally means to "put anger far away." It speaks of forbearance and long-suffering toward those who aggravate and persecute us, not pushing for a result or resolution. Patience is the antidote to the "biting and devouring" of verse 15, to the "outbursts of anger" of verse 20, and "provoking one another" in verse 26.

*Kindness*. Patience and kindness are two different sides of love. One is passive, the other, active. Patience is withholding anger; kindness is giving something that is contrary to what we receive. These words are given together in Romans 2 to describe God's attitude toward human arrogance, and they are the first two words that describe love in 1 Corinthians 13. Kindness finds ways to actively show mercy. It is often a question of disposition; the freedom to deal with life in a relaxed and leisurely fashion, not forcing, not coercing, not pushing and shoving.

*Goodness* is closely allied with kindness. Generally speaking, it is the all-embracing quality that describes one's character. It is a favorite word used to describe God's character in the Old Testament. When put into practice, goodness takes the form of "doing good." It involves words and deeds—active expressions of love. In chapter 6 we will see that those who sow to the Spirit "do good to all" (6:10). Goodness is the freedom to see and respond to life in terms of its good creation rather than in terms of its willful rebellion.

Patience, kindness and goodness can be seen in our attitude toward others.

*Faithfulness* is closely tied to trust in God. We believe, we have faith, and this faith works itself out in love. Faithfulness is the freedom to be involved in long-term, loyal commitments based on invisible values and meanings rather than immediate, tangible self-interest. We experience this with God and in relationships with others.

*Gentleness* is often translated "meekness." This word is used of the character of Jesus. Meekness is a sense of humility, a proper estimation of oneself. It is the antonym to "selfish ambitions" in the list of the works of the flesh. Meekness is the freedom not to assault a resistant world, but to be salt and light.

*Self-control*. This word is unique since it does not appear elsewhere in Scripture with reference to the character of God. This characteristic applies more to the individual believer than the community. Self-control involves self-mastery; the freedom to discipline and direct our energies wisely. It is impervious to whim and impulse. In the list of the works of the flesh, self-control takes aim at sexual indulgences and excessive use of alcohol. But it is not to be confused with abstinence, for elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul is harsh on anything that even smacks of abstinence for its own sake as a Christian virtue.

Faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control deal largely

with internal attitudes.

So this is what the fruit of the Spirit looks like. Freedom is living under the control of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit produces godly character. This freedom is manifested in healthy relationships in church, in marriage, with our children, and in business—in all relationships. This kind of freedom is in direct contrast to living under the law, which manifests itself in unhealthy relationships and is described by the deeds of the flesh. Thus, as we observe our relationships, we can evaluate our spiritual climate. If we see the works of the flesh, that is a sign that we are living under law. But if we see the fruit of the Spirit, then we know that we are enjoying freedom in Christ.

Notice the contrast between works and fruit. The flesh, of course, is characterized by works, implying sweat, labor and toil. It takes great effort to sustain the flesh, because the emphasis is on human endeavor. But fruit is organic and self-sustaining. It is a result or a by-product of something. If the tree is healthy, then the fruit is good.

Eugene Peterson says that “fruit is the result of a long organic and living process. The process is complex and intricate. Fruits are not something made, manufactured or engineered. They are not the product of the drawing board. They are not the invention of a genius. They are not the product of a sophisticated technology. They are the results of a life of faith created by God...Fruit is the appropriate metaphor. We do not produce it by our own effort. We do not purchase it from another. It is not a reward for doing good deeds, like a merit badge, a gold medal, a blue ribbon. Fruits are simply there” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 166). This is why Jesus said, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

Fruit is simply the manifestation of what is going on inside. The life that is in the roots and in the trunk will naturally produce fruit in the branches. Our behavior will mirror the source of our life, the roots of our nourishment. If we are under law, we will see the works of the flesh. If we are abiding in Christ, we will see the fruit of the Spirit. Godly character is the result of a life that abides in God. We cannot produce it. We remain healthy and free by abiding, and the agent of our abiding is the Spirit. Irenaeus said, “He became what we are so that we might become what he is” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 170).

My third observation is this: The Spirit eliminates the need for law in that it fulfills the law. The Holy Spirit produces godly character. The result is that we are free from living under the control of the law and from being obsessed with performance. It is the Spirit who writes God’s law on our hearts. And the fact that we are no longer under law does not mean the end of righteousness. Rather, the Spirit produces the real thing. Against such things as the fruit of the Spirit there is no law.

An illustration will help us here. What is the first thing you do when you see a police car driving behind you? You look at the speedometer, don’t you? You want to see if you are breaking the law of the speed limit. Do we need further proof that the function of law is to curb, restrain and

deter?

But the presence of the Spirit makes the law irrelevant. When we walk in the Spirit we don’t have to keep looking over our shoulders, wondering if we are doing anything wrong, whether we have approval or not. We are no longer controlled by guilt, condemnation or rejection. We don’t have an attitude of just getting by on the minimum. Rather, we walk in the “now” of God’s presence. We are looking for ways to love. Gordon Fee has a good word here: “There is no need of Torah to say ‘you shall not kill,’ to people who by the Spirit are loving one another, nor to say, ‘don’t covet,’ to those who are actively pursuing the good of others out of kindness. This does not mean, of course, that such *reminders* are irrelevant—Paul himself is long on such—but that the need for Torah to ‘hem in human conduct because of the transgressions’ (3:19, 22) has come to end with the advent of the Spirit, God’s way of fulfilling his promised new covenant” (*God’s Empowering Presence* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994] 453).

The fourth observation is this: The Spirit identifies us with the new humanity, a new community. As Christians, we have entered into the kingdom of heaven. God did not enter into our world in order to perfect it; he came that he might take us to the new humanity. The flesh and the law are part of the old order in which people practice the works of the flesh and do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. Even as Christians, when we live under the law we live like flesh people. But the apostle’s point in verse 21 is that we no longer have to live under law like flesh people, because we are Spirit people. We have been separated from this world, delivered from this present evil age. Our struggle is in seeing the extent of this transformation. The Spirit is God’s agent for bringing together a new community and empowering us to experience God-like relationships. God wants us to share with one another the kind of relationship that he wants with us. In this way we experience God through the Spirit. Community, therefore, is the context of this passage.

This is what our singles group discovers on our Yucatan trip each year. For one week we experience New Testament, first century community in a small Mayan village in Mexico. While the week is not always fun—tensions do arise at times—we experience love, encouragement, forgiveness, serving, and joy in community. We enjoy relationships, and we enjoy God through the fruit of the Spirit. When we return home we have culture shock because we miss the sense of community that we had in Mexico. This year I had the privilege of taking my 14-year old daughter to the Yucatan for the first time. When she returned home, she told her mother, “I loved being with all the Christian women.” Last weekend we had our picture party. It was scheduled to start at 5 o’clock, and Annie and I were doing some shopping in the afternoon for mother’s day. She must have asked what time it was every ten minutes. At 4:30, she made sure we headed home to pick up her mother for the party. She wasn’t home, and I told Annie that we should wait; it wouldn’t hurt if we were a little late. She said, “Dad we are not going to wait. We are going to go now. I have been waiting all week for this party.”

How true are the words of Paul, “against such things there is no law.” We are Spirit people, and this is Spirit community, and God’s purpose is that we have Spirit relationships. We don’t practice freedom by ourselves for our-

selves. My prayer for us as a community of believers is that we would begin to manifest and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes in these verses. I pray that our marriages would be healthy, that our relationships with our children would be free and honest, and that when we come to church, we would enjoy the love, joy and peace that only God can bring. That is my vision for our church. "Against such things there is no law."

My last observation is this: The exhortation here is to say "yes" to the Spirit. Paul uses three words, "walk," "lead," and "stay in step," to encourage Christians to live Spirit-filled lives. These words imply a two-fold process: "lead" describes the action of the Spirit, "walk" and "stay in step" describe the action of the believer. There is passive as well as active activity.

The passive activity is that we are being "led by the Spirit" (18). John Stott describes this process in these words, "The verb is used of a farmer herding cattle, of a shepherd leading sheep, of soldiers escorting a prisoner to court or prison, and of wind driving a ship...As our 'leader' the Holy Spirit takes the initiative. He asserts His desires against those of the flesh (verse 17) and forms within us holy and heavenly desires. He puts this gentle pressure upon us, and we must yield to His direction and control" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 152).

The active activity is to "walk and stay in step" (16, 25). The word "walk" in verse 16 is Paul's normal word for walk. It is his favorite word for ethical actions, covering the whole sphere of our activities. The verb in verse 25 refers literally to people being drawn up in line. Hence it means to walk in line or be in line with. A certain rule, standard or a principle is being followed. Sometimes it is translated "conform" (Rom. 4:12; Acts 21:24; Phil. 3:16; Gal. 6:16). Both verbs are in the present continuous tense. It is the Spirit who does the leading but we who do the walking—it is we who are to follow after him. To walk by the Spirit, then, is to deliberately walk along the path or according to the line which the Holy Spirit lays down. The Spirit leads us, but we are to walk by him, according to his rule.

There is a divine person in our life who is constantly leading, beckoning, urging and prodding us. He is before us, within us, around us and through us, and he wants us to follow him. When we walk where he leads, he produces good fruit in our lives and leads us in paths of righteousness. Paul's argument is that since we live as a result of the Spirit's work, then we should continue to live in him. The Spirit is leading and empowering, but the choice we are always making is to follow after him. We do not have the power to do, but we do have the power to choose. We follow, we abide, we pray, we listen, and then we take a step of faith. In the sacrifice of Jesus our flesh has been crucified with him. The old order of law and flesh is past, and we have the freedom to say no. Because of the Spirit, who opposes the flesh, fulfills the law, identifies us in the new order and produces the character of God, we have the freedom to say yes.

There is a great deal of talk these days about the Spirit, most of it centered on signs and wonders. While these manifestations are important and should not be diminished, I wish we would talk more about this passage on the work of the Spirit in Galatians 5. In the Upper Room, Jesus had much to say about that work. We love the miraculous and the sensational, but what about the quiet fruit of God's Spirit? Are we as awed by godly character as we are about the miraculous? What good are miracles if we don't have freedom and healthy relationships? The fruit of the Spirit is indeed a miracle of gigantic proportions. The fact that God can reproduce his life in me is a miracle. The truth that I can be set free to love through the Spirit is a miracle. The reality of having free and healthy relationships in my marriage and with my children is a miracle. The joy of hearing the Father call me his beloved son is the greatest miracle of all.

These then are the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. May God grant that as a body of believers we will experience such fruit in abundance.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino



# WORKING OUT FREEDOM IN COMMUNITY

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 985  
Galatians 5:26–6:6  
Eighteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
May 28th, 1995

Most people spend their days interacting with others. We are all involved in community, whether with family members, roommates, fellow workers, in home fellowships, at school, or on the sidelines of sporting events. Each day our lives touch the lives of others.

The theme of community is foremost in the mind of the apostle Paul in the final chapter of his letter to the Galatians. We begin today with verse 26 of chapter 5, where we take up our studies once more.

**Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.**

**Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load.**

**And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.** (Gal 5:26-6:6, NASB)

We can point to four things to demonstrate that Christian community was uppermost in the mind of the apostle as he wrote these verses.

First, Paul gives two warnings, in 5:15, 26, with respect to community life. These warnings could be considered book-ends to the section that comes between, the apostle's discourse on the fruit of the Spirit. Second, the term "one another" is repeated five times from verses 5:13-6:2, as follows: v. 13: "through love serve one another"; v. 15: "take care lest you be consumed by one another"; v. 26: "challenging one another, envying one another"; v. 2: "bear one another's burdens." Third, chapter 6 begins with an address to brethren, indicating that Christians are responsible to one another because they are brothers and sisters. Fourth, the summary verse 6:10 draws attention to the household of faith, i.e. it is addressed to the family of God: "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."

As we have already seen, the book of Galatians is all about living freely in contrast to living under the law. This is how a Spirit-controlled community lives. Freedom is not to be used for our own private benefit, but rather that we might love one another. It is the Spirit of God who enables Christians to have healthy relationships. Christian freedom, therefore, is authenticated by relationships which are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit rather than the deeds of the flesh; and communities and families are the

arenas where these things are fleshed out and practiced.

Cultivating community, loving one another and forming healthy relationships, is not an easy thing, however. We don't always get to choose the people we have to interact with. (If we did, I'm sure many of us would make some changes!) Oftentimes the most draining, confusing and disrupting influences in life are the very people we must be around all day. People disappoint, irritate and hurt us. They fail to live up to our expectations. Instead of loving one another we respond by pushing each other's buttons. We take our hurt and anger out on one another. We punch and bully and fight. In Paul's words, we "bite and devour one another" (5:15), and, as a result, we consume one another.

This is clear evidence that our emotions are affected and oftentimes controlled by our relationships. But we must remember that we are living under law when we look to others for our sense of approval and value—and unhealthy relationships are the result of this lifestyle. Christian freedom, however, is the state of joy that arises from becoming emotionally detached from the negative influences of others, with the result that we are not seeking to control people emotionally and we are not responding to the threat of being controlled. The key to freedom is our sonship in Christ; and it is the Spirit who enables us to demonstrate love in our relationships, instead of biting and devouring one another.

In these verses the apostle offers practical advice about how freedom is worked out in community. The text reveals first, the prerequisite to love, and second, four ways in which Christians demonstrate love in the community of believers.

First, the prerequisite to love: "Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another" (5:26). In order to love one another, we need to have a proper view of ourselves in relation to others. The exhortation is to "not become boastful." This command is the opposite bookend to 5:15; it completes the paragraph on walking in the Spirit in 5:16-25. The fact that Paul warns the Galatians not to bite and devour or to become boastful indicates that that was the very thing that was happening within the Galatian church. The word "boastful" describes someone who has an opinion of himself which is empty, vain, or false. Our conduct toward others is determined by our opinion of ourselves. When relationships with others deteriorate, conceit is almost invariably the basic cause.

The problem with boasting, of course, is that it demonstrates our need to compare and measure ourselves against others. We achieve a sense of worth by considering ourselves better than them, so we compete in every area of life. We want to be first in line. We want the biggest piece of cake. We compete in school, in athletics, at work and on

the freeways. We even use our children to compete; their ability to outperform other children brings us a sense of satisfaction. The Bay Area in particular seems to breed this kind of competitive spirit. But when our lives are controlled by this kind of competitive behavior, we are never free to love.

Now conceit and boasting by Christians are manifested in one of two ways: we either challenge one another or we envy one another. When we challenge others, the implication is that we are so sure of our superiority we want to demonstrate it. And when we feel unaccepted or unapproved, we gain a sense of value by challenging someone we know we can best.

Challenging is what makes us an active controller. I learned this at a young age. My brother Larry is ten years older than me. When I was a boy, we played tennis once, and he thrashed me. I didn't like it. Even a trip to the root beer stand afterwards failed to console me. Years later, I finally was able to turn the tables on him. We would often go jogging together, and at the end of our jog, we'd have a sprint. This was where my ten-year advantage in years paid off. I was much faster than him, and I'd never let him get ahead of me no matter how many times we exercised together. But as Christians we must not do this, challenging one another and seeking to outdo one another.

A second way Christians manifest boasting or conceit is by "envying one another." This happens when we become jealous of one another's gifts or achievements. It implies that we are so sure of our inferiority, we cannot possibly compete with them. We respond by becoming resentful. We gossip about them, seeking to find fault with them; we become angry at them. This kind of response is what turns us into passive controllers. In the story of the prodigal son, the elder son demonstrated resentment and jealousy based upon a wrong view of himself. People tend to imitate others by comparing themselves with them. If we feel either superior or inferior, our attitude is due to conceit, to our having such an unrealistic opinion of ourselves that we cannot bear rivals.

This quote from author Henri Nouwen has been helpful to me:

In a world that constantly compares people, ranking them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful, it is not easy to really believe in a love that does not do the same. When I hear someone praised, it is hard not to think of myself as less praiseworthy; when I read about the goodness and kindness of other people, it is hard not to wonder whether I myself am as good and kind as they; and when I see trophies, rewards, and prizes being handed out to special people, I cannot avoid asking myself why that didn't happen to me.

The world in which I have grown up is a world so full of grades, scores, and statistics that, consciously or unconsciously, I always try to take my measure against all the others. Much sadness and gladness in my life flows directly from my comparing, and most, if not all, of this comparing is useless and a terrible waste of time and energy (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 103).

The solution to this problem of competing and comparing ourselves with others is found in having a proper view

of ourselves in relation to others. If we have this proper view, then we can love and serve people and not insist on competing with them. The key to this is our identity as sons of God. When we clearly see our value as sons of God, then we will stop comparing ourselves with others and we will find joy in all our relationships. We will be free to see others too as sons and daughters of God, having the same standing as ourselves. We will begin to see that God loves others just as he loves us. We will see them with the eyes of the Father and we will highly value them. We will be joyful, not resentful, when someone else experiences the love of God. We must be careful, however, to not confuse low-self esteem with virtue. If we feel worthless and inferior, that is a sign that we are not experiencing sonship. We need to see ourselves as just as valuable as anyone else. Then, as sons of God, we can love others as we love ourselves.

This was brought home to me recently on the baseball diamond. I have coached many basketball, baseball and football teams, and I have to admit that I have always been very competitive. This year, however, I am not nearly as competitive as I was in earlier years, and I am having a wonderful time coaching a 15- and 16-year-old boys baseball team. One boy came out for the first game and it was obvious he was trying very hard to do well. I put him in to pitch, but I had to take him out because he was having a problem throwing strikes. He became very worked up about this and I had to have a chat with him. I told him to try to relax and not to strive so hard. He said he was anxious because he was used to being yelled at by his coaches at school. I told him that I would not do that with him, that he was a good ballplayer and a valuable part of our team. The following week he played very well, and he has been getting better with every game we play. I was gratified also to see some growth in my own demeanor, which enabled me to care more about my players than I do about winning. I now feel free to love, to watch kids blossom and succeed, instead of challenging them and becoming boastful.

John Stott articulates the attitude we should have as Christians in these words: "Truly Christian relationships are governed not by rivalry but by service. The correct attitude to other people is not 'I'm better than you and I'll prove it,' nor 'You're better than I and I resent it,' but 'You are a person of importance in your own right (because God made you in His own image and Christ died for you) and it is my joy and privilege to serve you'" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 157).

Paul now goes on to identify four ways in which Christians can demonstrate love for their brethren. The first way has to do with restoration and forgiveness, as we see in 6:1: "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."

The one who takes this action of love is the "spiritual one"—the mature Christian who is walking in the Spirit. The word "trespass" implies that there is sin involved; we must not do this with someone merely because we don't like the way he or she dresses. The goal of love in this case is to restore the one who is caught in sin. "Restore" means to put in order, to restore to its former condition. This was a medical term used in secular Greek for setting a fractured or dislocated bone (it is applied to mending nets in

Mark 1:19).

If we live under law we are always trying to catch people in sin so that we can criticize them. We turn someone else's sin into fodder for gossip and a reason for boasting about our own perceived righteousness. If we find someone caught in a trespass, we can stand by and do nothing, on the pretext that it is none of our business, or we can despise and condemn them in our hearts, even report them to the pastor. If they suffer as a result, we say that it serves them right. But love deals with sin in a godly and purposeful way. We must hate the sin but love the sinner. We must not be alarmed by the fact that someone has sinned, but to even use sin as an occasion to love. Since we know that God has been gracious and faithful with us in dealing with our sin, we have the capacity and freedom to treat others the same way.

We must approach someone caught in sin in a spirit of gentleness. This is how Abigail, the wife of Nabal, approached David, when David was going to take Nabal's life (1 Samuel 25). Gentleness is one of the fruits of the Spirit; it is a characteristic of true spirituality. The caution is to look to ourselves lest we also be tempted by sin. We must never think we are safe from sinning or that we are above failing. Gentleness is born of a sense of our own weakness and proneness to sin.

As a young Christian, I was involved in something that was quite unhealthy spiritually, and a certain brother came to me and harshly condemned me. Of course, I wasn't very receptive. I defended myself. Some time later, another brother came to me. Gently, he asked me, "John, what do you think about this matter?" I told him he was right, and I immediately stopped involving myself in what I had been doing. I was restored by the gentle word of a brother. John Stott comments, "if we obeyed this apostolic instruction as we should, much unkind gossip would be avoided, more serious backsliding prevented, the good of the church advanced, and the name of Christ glorified" (*Galatians*, 162). The question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we committed enough to want to help restore others in the body to a healthy relationship with God?

The second way we are called to love in community is by bearing one another's burdens. Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). "Bear" means to carry; "burdens" implies heavy loads. The assumption is that we cannot bear everything by ourselves. Even though we cast our burdens on God, we are not to look to him alone; we are to live in community with brothers and sisters in Christ. Bearing burdens implies that we are responsible to help others with their heavy loads, and that we are willing to give up our own burdens when they become too much for us. Bearing burdens is helping a mother with three children and fourteen suitcases make her way through the airport by carrying some of her luggage and helping her. In the Yucatan this year, we got to know a woman who had had twelve children, nine of whom died in infancy. One of the three survivors was unable to walk, and some of our young singles ministered to that child, taking her on bike rides and sharing their resources with the family. This kind of burden bearing is a natural outflow of living in community.

The result of this bearing of burdens, according to Paul, is "you will fulfill the law of Christ." The law of Christ is the law of love, as stated in chapter 5:14: "For the whole

Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" We should extend to others the same kind of care we would like to receive. To love our neighbor, then, is equivalent to bearing one another's burdens, which is equivalent to fulfilling the law.

Paul adds a warning to his exhortation so that we are not deceived: "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (6:3). This kind of mindset interferes with bearing burdens. This verse relates back to 5:26, implying that bearing burdens stands in direct contrast to being conceited. If we think we are something, we will not bear another's burdens because we think we are above it. We will become independent and self-sufficient, and our conduct toward others will be governed by our inflated opinion of ourselves.

When we live under law, we impose the law as a burden upon others. When we live in freedom, we lift the burdens off others and thus fulfill the law of Christ. Bearing burdens, therefore, is a manifestation of a Spirit-controlled community. Luther said, "Christians must have strong shoulders and mighty bones."

A third way we allow for love in the community is by evaluating ourselves properly and not using the Christian community in an unhealthy way. Verses 4-5: "But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load." The exhortation is that we should test our own work. This implies minding our business, not comparing ourselves to others and scrutinizing our neighbor; not challenging, envying and being conceited. Rather than boasting in another we boast in ourselves. Bearing burdens does not give us permission to insert ourselves in an unhealthy way into the lives of others and use people in the community for our own self promotion. This is what characterized the agitators in the Galatian churches. Testing our own work allows us to focus on our own relationship with God and walk with him.

The reasons we are to test our own work is that we must carry our own load. This might seem like a contradiction to verse 2, but Paul uses a different word for burden in verse 5 compared to verse 2. "Burdens" in verse 2 are heavy, and the word is plural; "load" in verse 5 refers to a common term for a man's pack—a day pack. Therefore we are responsible for ourselves before God; there is a certain amount of weight that each of us must carry. If you go backpacking with a group, every person carries a pack. No one is completely free to carry nothing.

At certain times, the burdens of life are crushing. That is when we need the help of others. But we must not forget that the pressures of everyday life are sometimes burdensome. We must learn to carry our load and let others carry theirs. On occasion people in the body use burden-bearing as an excuse to be involved in an unhealthy way in the lives of others, helping others in order to feel better about themselves. By doing so find worth and approval, or we use this as a way of escaping our own struggles and pain. A character in a John Fowles novel commented on this type of person, "I think she's trying to solve the world's problems as a substitute for facing one or two of her own" (quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 170).

The final way Christians demonstrate love in community has to do with pastors. Verse 6, “And let each one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.” Pastors need love, too, just like everyone else in the body. They are not superior or inferior to others. They are not to be put on pedestals for their spirituality, or chastened for their inability to meet every perceived need. Pastors are simply people whom God has set aside to study and teach God’s Word. And the one being taught shares all good things with the one who teaches. The word for “share” is the word for fellowship— *koinonia*. A pastor may expect to be supported by the congregation if people benefit spiritually from his or her work. The pastor sows the good seed of God’s Word and reaps a livelihood. He shares spiritual things with the flock, and they share material things with him.

Pastors are not to control the body, and the body is not to control the pastor. Sadly, these unhealthy emotional patterns are present in many churches. The reason freedom and love is so important between pastors and the flock is so that the Word of God might have its proper effect in the lives of the community. Legalism interferes with the centrality and power of teaching and preaching. The way love manifests itself in the community is by people valuing the Word of God by supporting those who teach. I myself have been greatly helped by some special people in this body—and not just materially. They love me for who I am—a brother who is in a mess a lot of the time.

What is striking about this is the value of the Word of God. Churches can easily become self-oriented, need-oriented or program-oriented. The flock can look to the pastor to do everything so that he is left with no time to study and prepare for teaching. I am grateful for the legacy that we have here in this church. We have always highly valued the Word of God and made it central to our worship. This is what attracted me to our church in the first place. I began to experience the power of the Word of God

through preaching, and to observe how it could transform lives. The elders at PBC have always encouraged the pastors to study so that when they teach they have something to say. At times this means that we are not always efficient, nevertheless it is the right priority.

So these are some of the ways that Christians are called to love in the community: restoring others, bearing burdens, self-evaluation, and recognizing the centrality of the Word of God. And this is how God is calling us to love one another at PBC. Loving others is not easy, living in community is not easy, but this is what God has called us to. Don’t look for the perfect Christian community; it doesn’t exist. The call is to put a stake in the ground, stop comparing, and begin loving. This is where we begin to work out our freedom in Christ. There is a great deal at risk, but there is a great deal to gain, too. As we live in community with one another we experience the life of God. We begin to have a taste of heaven, and we partake together of the fruit of the Spirit. Freedom is not self-sufficiency; it is a shared life. The goal is a Spirit-controlled community that is committed to honest and healthy biblical relationships.

I want to close this morning with these words about love from the pen of C.S. Lewis:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact—you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket of your selfishness. And in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love is in hell.

May God grant us the freedom to love one another in the ways the apostle has described in these very practical guidelines for Christian community.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino





## DYING TO BE FREE

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

Catalog No. 986S  
Galatians 6:11-18  
Twentieth Message  
John Hanneman  
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.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino