

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!**

#### **God's Big Tent**

(Galatians 3:26--4:7)

Study #7

#### **Introduction:** All in the family...

One of my favorite Christian authors, Philip Yancey, wrote the following in an article published in Leadership Journal about a dozen years ago.

*“Given a choice, I tend to hang out with folks like me: people who have college degrees, drink only Starbucks dark roast coffee, listen to classical music, and buy their cars based on EPA gas mileage ratings. Yet, after a short while I get bored with people like me...”*

I understand what he's saying! If Yancey would be bored with clones of himself, I'd be bored to tears surrounded by Dave clones.

That, among other things, is what prompts me to say, *“Thank God for the church!”* I sometimes wonder if God created the church to keep us all from getting bored. I guarantee that if you will immerse yourself in the life of the church, you will not get bored!

The church, like the family, is an institution where we don't get to choose our company. Depending on your experience with either family or church, that observation may bring either wild delight or resentment. But it is true.

We don't get to choose who will attend our family reunions.

At these gatherings, we will be joined by kin of all ages, the un- and the under-employed, people we are proud to introduce to others and people of whom we may be embarrassed. That's family.

And we don't get to choose who will arrive on Sunday morning, who we will sit next to in worship, or with whom we'll share a table at a Sunday morning brunch.

This delightful diversity is by divine design.

God knows that certain very powerful things happen in settings where differences abound that don't happen in settings where there is lock-step uniformity. And the rich diverseness in the church is something to rejoice about!

Today, we are celebrating the church as God's “big tent” family and the amazing diverse make-up of the church.

On the way to that celebration, we'll take a few minutes to remember the wonder of our relationship with God through faith in Christ.

#### **In God's Family - NOT Under a Tutor (3:23-26)**

##### **Re-tutoring: the Role of the Tutor**

*[3:23] But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. [24] Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. [25] But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.*

Since we spent a good bit of time with these verses last Sunday I only want to mention them briefly today.

Paul says that the law served as a “tutor”, an instructor, to lead us to faith in Christ.

Now the Law doesn't tutor people in the way that my favorite math tutor (Kathy!) teaches and encourages her students to build on successes. She and every other good tutor cheers her students on with every triumph.

Not so the Law.

The Law points us to salvation through faith in Christ by pointing out every single time we fail. But in doing this, the “Law tutor” convinces us of our need for a Savior and leads us to seek an entirely different way to approach God from Law, the way of trusting in His PROMISE!

And as soon as you exercised faith in the Promise (placed your faith in Jesus), you entered spiritual adulthood and were given a mature standing before God!

### **Faith in Christ Ushers Us into God’s Family! (3:26)**

*[26] For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

What an incredible privilege! All of us who have placed our faith in Christ alone are sons and daughters of God. That means that God is our Father!

It is crucial that we grasp this. We are in a mature relationship with God, no longer under a harsh tutor. Great illustration, Paul! But that’s not the only illustration Paul had up his sleeve to show us the richness of our new relationship with God.

Skip on down to chapter 4 of Galatians and we’ll hear him talk about our change in status from that of a slave to that of an adopted son.

### **In God’s Family; NOT in Slavery (4:1-7)**

#### **Our Lives as Children (vv. 1-3)**

*The Roman child’s bondage (vv. 1-2)*

*[1] Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave<sup>1</sup> although he is owner of everything, [2] but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.*

At the time Paul wrote this letter, there were about 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, so it is safe to assume that the Galatians knew all about slavery!

In Rome, slavery was not the shameful racial thing it was in the United States. But, even though it wasn’t racially based, as in America, Roman slavery was still a shameful thing.

In pre-Christian centuries, there is good evidence that Roman slaves were treated barbarically. You may have heard horror stories that tell of the mistreatment of Roman slaves, which I won’t recount here. It was truly awful.

The ancient Roman slave population consisted mostly of conquered peoples. Slaves were sometimes kept for the explicit purpose of the amusement of the owner by exploitation and abuse.

However, by the time of the writing of the New Testament, for a variety of reasons, “*sweeping humanitarian changes had been introduced into the Roman world...which led to radically improved treatment of slaves.*”<sup>2</sup>

So, I don’t want to paint a darker picture of first century slavery than is accurate. There had been improvement for the lot of the Roman slave.

Still, some things had not changed. A slave still had no rights, no social privileges, no freedoms. The slave was still considered the property of his owner.

And in that, the status of a young child in the Roman Empire was little different from that of the slave.

A child might stand to inherit a great sum of money, might even be in line to receive a Kingdom if he was the son of the Emperor. But as long as he was a minor, he had no more rights and privileges and real freedoms than a slave.

<sup>1</sup> Doulos (δουλος) the Greek word that is used for slave here, signifies a permanent relationship of servitude to another.

<sup>2</sup> From The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 5, p. 458, “Slavery” by A. Rupprecht, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.

The Bible frequently tells us that there is a parallel between the physical world and the spiritual. And here Paul brings to mind the history of the Jewish nation to draw that parallel into stark relief.

*The spiritual child's bondage (v. 3)*

Fifteen hundred years before Christ, God created a nation for His own pleasure, the nation of Israel. He had chosen Abraham to be the father of this nation centuries earlier, around 2,000 BC.

The family of Abraham's grandson, Jacob, grew to about seventy people when they left Canaan for Egypt during the days of Joseph.

That family grew through four centuries in the womb of Egypt into a great nation. Then, under the leadership of Moses, the nation was "birthed" through the Red Sea at the Exodus.

They landed on the other side (in the Sinai Peninsula) and God promptly gave them the Mosaic Law.

Now please understand that the apostle Paul had the utmost respect for the Law of God.

He knew that while it didn't give life, it did preserve life. He knew that Law helped to maintain a stable society. He knew that the Law illustrated God's holiness and would have shouted out with the psalmist, "**How I love Your Law, O Lord!**" (Psalm 119)

Paul also knew that the Law was "**holy and righteous and good**" (Romans 7) AND that its demands led people to see that they needed grace and that it would therefore lead them to faith in Christ.

But, knowing all of that, listen to the way he characterizes the role of the Law in the lives of the people of God.

**[3] So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things<sup>3</sup> of the world.**

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<sup>3</sup> Στοιχεια = elemental things; See Heb. 5:12, and Col. 2:8, both of which speak of "elemental things." The point is that "elemental things" are not effective in promoting substantial progress and growth.

The Jewish people spent fifteen hundred years in spiritual childhood. The Law told them what to do. It was their tutor. It provided them with the ABC's of spiritual education.

The Law dictated the behavior of the people of God down to some of the minutest details. For instance...

In addition to describing the holiness of God and telling the people how to approach Him through the sacrifices, it prescribed the way they were to dig latrines, how to deal with leprosy, what to eat, with whom they were to interact, how they were to settle the land of Canaan (when they got there), how to conduct their married sex lives - and more!

Those fifteen centuries of detailed Law set the stage for God's people to enter spiritual adulthood. They learned their ABC's under Moses, so that they could meet Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega!

When Jesus entered the human scene late one December night in Bethlehem of Judea, born in a barn and laid in a manger, God revealed Himself in ways He never had before.

And He showed that the way of salvation was by faith in His Son.

**Christ's Work - at Just the Right Time! (vv. 4-7)**

*The timing of Christ's arrival (v. 4)*

**[4] But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son<sup>4</sup>, born of a woman, born under the Law**

That comment is loaded, so let's take a minute or two to unpack it.

Paul emphasizes that God's Son was "**born of a woman**" to say that God the Father sent His Son to be a genuine member of the human race. He didn't live in our midst as an exalted alien.

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<sup>4</sup> When Paul says that God sent His Son, he is stressing the eternal existence of the Son. God did not "create" or "invent" His Son. He sent a Son who was already existing with Him in Heaven.

He says that Jesus was “*born under the Law*” to highlight His solidarity with the plight of mankind. Jesus wasn’t exempt from the Law, but was subject to it.

And when he writes that Christ came “*in the fullness of the time*” we understand that there was an historical timeliness to Jesus’ appearance.

The *pax Romana* was a time of unparalleled peace and world stability that lasted for as long as three hundred years and dominated the Indo-European world.

There were good Roman roads and a common language (Greek). Paganism’s decline (in light of the bankruptcy of Greek and Roman pantheons<sup>5</sup>) created a vacuum into which Christianity easily slid.

And biblically, the time was ripe for Jesus’ arrival.

In a fascinating study, New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner discovered that Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He allowed the crowds to declare Him King, was precisely - TO THE DAY! - the day that was predicted for the nation to begin to enter its messianic rest!<sup>6</sup>

The societal and historical and biblical ducks were lined up so that Jesus could accomplish the work God had for Him to do. What was that work? Listen.

*The purpose of Christ’s arrival (v. 5)*

***[5] in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.***

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<sup>5</sup> As well, we know of the rise in popularity of the mystery religion’s and Judaism’s decline due to its sham, as well documented in the Gospels.

<sup>6</sup> Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Harold W. Hoehner, Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, pp. 138-39. Hoehner traces the “seventy weeks” of Daniel (seventy periods of seven years) from March 4, 444 BC (the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and, by extension rebuild and restore the city, Nehemiah 2:1). Using the prophetic year of 360 days, the 69 “weeks” of captivity Daniel predicts is completed on March 30, AD 33, the day of the Triumphal Entry. The final week consists of the seven years of the Tribulation Period (Revelation 6-19).

The Son of God came for a clearly spelled out purpose. It was to buy men and women and boys and girls back from spiritual slavery so that they might be adopted as God’s “sons” (inclusive for sons and daughters), lawful heirs to all His riches!

Paul uses two terms in this verse, *redemption* and *adoption*, with which every Galatian would have been very familiar. Every one of us needs to be familiar with them, too.

When using the language of redemption, he was speaking the language of the Roman slave trade.

#### First - REDEMPTION

In the Roman world, if a man wanted to set a certain slave free, he would outbid all others at a slave auction, and offer a redemption price to buy him out of the market of slavery.

Christians have been redeemed (or ransomed) from the status of a spiritual slave to sin.

John Newton (the author of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*) was an only child who lost his mother when he was 7 years old. He went to sea at the age of eleven and became involved in what he later called “*the unspeakable atrocities of the African slave trade.*”<sup>7</sup>

Newton came to know Christ at the age of 23 in the throes of a terrible ocean storm. He cried out to God for mercy - and he, a true wretch, found it! Not long afterward he left the slave trade. But he never forgot the lifestyle from which God had rescued him.

To ensure that he never would forget, he had the words of Deuteronomy 15:15 inscribed in bold letters across his mantel at home: ***And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.***

When you trust Christ as Savior, God redeems you.

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<sup>7</sup> Those who have read much of American history, or have even seen movies like *Amistad*, which depicts the 18th century American slave trade, will understand the depths of depravity to which a slave trader sank.

And lest any of us think of this redemption as a lazy, slow-moving deliberate process, consider Hollywood blockbusters that have the theme of ransom/redemption woven into their storylines.

God's ransom of us from slavery to sin has all the breathless urgency and desperation to it that you find in films like "Signs of Life" or "Man on Fire" or "Live Free or Die Hard" or "Ransom" or the new thriller "Taken"!

He redeems us from slavery to sin - a land of no freedom - so that we can know the liberty of living the way we were designed to live. Loving our families and friends, treating others fairly, doing everything to honor God. And He purchased our freedom by the shed blood of His Son, Jesus!

Likewise, "adoption" was a very common practice in the Roman Empire, as it has been in most every culture throughout history.

### Second - ADOPTION

Today, as it has always been, adoption is the process of formally and legally bringing someone into your family who was not born into your family.

In Rome, because of the absolute power of a father over his family<sup>8</sup>, the primary emphasis in adoption was on the transfer of a son from the authority of one father to the authority of a new father.

Sometimes, even the Emperor would adopt a son to succeed him on the throne if he felt that his natural offspring would not make a good Emperor. The adopted son could then lawfully become the next ruler of the Roman Empire!

From time to time, I have been privileged to witness the marvel of adoption. I've been overwhelmed at the process each time.

- The willingness of a birth mother to give up her child to another couple is truly an act of selfless love.
- The longing of the adopting couple for a child, and their passion to bless the child who comes into their home, is always stirring.

- AND, I am always struck with the total vulnerability and dependence of the adopted child - of whatever age he or she might be - on the new family.

ADOPTION and REDEMPTION would have been concepts familiar to the Galatians to whom Paul was writing. But they would not have ever imagined that a former slave would be adopted as a son.

A slave might be **redeemed** and set free, and that would be a wonderful redemption. And the son of one father might be **adopted** by a more powerful or wealthier father, and that would be a wonderful adoption.

But Paul says here that before we placed our faith in Christ, we were slaves to sin, positioned at the lowest spot of the universe's spiritual totem pole. And God did something truly amazing.

He not only purchased our redemption. He went on to do something a Father/father never did. He adopted us as sons and daughters with all the rights and privileges and freedoms that comes with belonging to membership in His family!

And what are the implications of being a part of God's family? Listen.

*The effect of Christ's arrival (vv. 6-7)*

**[6] And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son<sup>9</sup> into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'<sup>10</sup> [7] Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.**

As I mentioned last week, being a child of God is among the highest privileges the Gospel offers.

Not only are our sins forgiven when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are also brought into a relationship of intimacy and safety with God. Wow!

<sup>9</sup> Notice the implicit reference to the Trinity here, with the mention of the Father, Spirit and Son.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus called God "Abba" (Mark 14:36)

<sup>8</sup> Known as "*patria potestas*."

It is astounding that our Heavenly Father allows us to climb up into His lap, as it were, and call Him “Daddy” (“Abba”).<sup>11</sup> And, that as sons and daughters, He now calls us His “heirs” should calm our every fear about the future and set our hearts at rest.

People who have or have had wonderful earthly fathers think about this stuff and get teary-eyed at the thought of an even greater Heavenly Father than they have known on earth.

People with wicked or weak fathers read these words and may get all emotional at the thought of finally having a Father in whom they can rest.

People who have never known their fathers read these words and feel their hearts beat fast because the human heart has a Daddy-shaped vacuum that can only be perfectly filled by God.

Over the years, I have had quite a few conversations with men and women (of all ages) who have told me father-stories.

Sometimes these are heart-stirring stories of great men who have equipped their sons and daughters with courage to face the world. Sometimes they are heart-breaking stories of relationships with weak, wicked or foolish fathers that have scarred them and wounded them.

But no matter what your experience of a father-daughter or a father-son relationship, know this for certain: There is a Father in Heaven who loves you perfectly, whose eye is ever on you, whose heart is ever toward you, and whose energies are ever directed toward blessing you.

The truth of the fatherhood of God for believers is about as rich a description of your new reality as the New Testament offers.

You are a child of the King of the Universe!

And you, a child of the King, have a multitude of brothers and sisters, princes and princesses, royal siblings all, who are also children of the King. And you and they are FAMILY...

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<sup>11</sup> Notice that in this passage, it is the Spirit who cries out, in our hearts, “Abba.” In Romans 8, Paul views us as actually speaking the “Abba.”

We are family members who have shared experiences, such as those mentioned in verse 27.

### **In God’s Family; A Very Big Tent (3:27-29)**

#### **Shared Experiences in Christ (v. 27)**

*[27] For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*<sup>12</sup>

#### *Baptism*

Baptism was a universal experience in the early church. Each believer in the churches of Galatia could identify with Paul’s words here. They had all been baptized.<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament speaks of two baptisms for the Christian. And in both baptisms, the believer is passive in the process.

- First, at the moment of conversation, the Holy Spirit baptizes each Christian by His own sovereign power, immersing that new believer into life in the Body of Christ.
- Second, in the rite of water baptism, other believers baptize their brothers and sisters in rivers or lakes or swimming pools or baptisteries.

Baptism is something that is done TO a person. You and every other Christian have been baptized by the Spirit. You and every other water-baptized Christian have been immersed in water and baptized in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

From historical sources, we understand that in the early church, baptisms frequently involved the removal of clothing and then a re-clothing afterwards.

I’m sure this was done in a way to ensure modesty, but the symbolism would not have been lost on anyone.

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<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, we are told to put on: the armor of light (Rom. 13:12), the new man (Eph. 4:24), the armor of God (Eph. 6:11), compassion (Col. 3:12).

<sup>13</sup> It has been suggested by many commentators that there was probably no such thing as an unbaptized believer in the early N.T. period.

By their disrobing and re-clothing those being baptized were symbolizing that they had taken off the old and were putting on the new.

### *Re-clothing*

Paul says something that is true for every Christian. Every one of us has been immersed in life IN Christ and we have all clothed ourselves with the life OF Christ.

Putting on Christ-clothing begins at conversion and continues throughout life.

There are seasons of greater and lesser progress in getting fully clothed with Christ. But growing as a Christian is all about putting on Christian character - love, patience, compassion, integrity, courage, purity.

And we've all begun that process. We're all on that road. We're brothers and sisters journeying together in that process.

And as we journey along, we rejoice in the fact that in the family of God, each and every one of us is of equal value and worth in the eyes of our Father.

### **Shared Identity and Riches in Christ (v. 28)**

***[28] 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.<sup>14</sup> [29] And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.<sup>15</sup>***

The categories Paul lists here represented the most basic divisions of society in the first century world.

The Jew/Greek line was a huge division in first century Roman society. Yet within a few short, the church was comprised of both Jews and Greeks.

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<sup>14</sup> Basically, the world's population breaks down into two groups. Those that divide humanity into two groups and those that don't. ☺

<sup>15</sup> See Colossians 3:11, where Paul lists other societal divisions ***“a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.”***

Then, in terms of privilege, there was no greater rift than could be found between slave and free. Yet quickly, the church attracted both to its ranks.

In many of his letters, Paul recognized social distinctions, sending greetings and sometimes giving separate instructions to slave and free. But in the church, slave and free were both welcomed and given honor.

And women and men share equal status in the family of God as sons and daughters of the King.<sup>16</sup>

Paul is certainly NOT saying that there is no difference between men and women!

But, he IS certainly saying that in Christ there is an essential equality between men and women. And, while in particular contexts, men and women fill differing roles, the males and females in this and every church are equal in the sight of God!

It is undeniable that the Christian church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free.

If you've ever read George Orwell's book, *Animal Farm*, you'll recall these memorable words: *“All pigs are equal, but some pigs are more equal than others.”* Not so in the church.

The church is a society where no one lords it over another, where all are welcome, and where the greater the diversity under the Lordship of Jesus, the better!

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<sup>16</sup> The Christian faith has historically held women in the highest positions, and elevated their status in society. The current discussion concerning the role of women in the church breaks down into egalitarian (no gender-based distinctions) or complementarian (equal in status before God, but some gender-based role distinctions still apply). At Northwest we believe that the Bible teaches a complementarian position.

## Conclusion:

God's family is truly a big, big tent.

In the CHURCH, which is the way the Bible refers to the sons and daughters of God in community, everyone who has placed trust in Jesus is welcome.

You've seen it as clearly as I have. Increasingly, our society *sub-divides* people. Increasingly, our church needs to seek to *unite* on the basis of faith in Jesus.

Society *defines* us according to ethnicity, our demographic, our socio-economic status. But in the church we are to *define* by our relationship to Almighty God.

So let's be real clear.

Jesus welcomes you here, to His church, regardless of your race, country of origin, or ethnicity. He welcomes you, regardless of your wealth or lack of it. He welcomes you if you are very young and if you are very old. He welcomes you if you are Democrat or Republican or Independent or Libertarian. He welcomes you regardless of your background or baggage, regardless of whether you have come from the foster care system, a broken home, or an intact nuclear family. He welcomes you if you suffer from a handicap, physical disability or mental impairment.

And those whom Jesus welcomes, we welcome, too!

In recent months, the Elders have been discussing the reality that the church of Jesus Christ is outrageously inclusive. We've been praying about how we, Northwest Community Church, might come to better mirror the "big tent" heart of our Father.

We've been asking this question, "*In a city as wonderfully diverse and inclusive as San Antonio, should we not better reflect that diversity in our church?*"

The church did in the first century.

One of the best known churches of the New Testament era was the church at Antioch, led by a wildly disparate group of men, including Hellenistic Jews, political power-brokers, ex-Pharisees, and Africans.<sup>17</sup>

These and others reveled in the reality that they were all sons of God through faith in Christ, which made them all **BROTHERS** - regardless of outward appearance or background. So they linked arms in passionate service in Jesus' Name.

It is too much to dream that our church could increasingly become this same expression of a big-tent family? Is it too much to pray that God would bring to our church people from every walk of life? Is it too much to ask that we become color-blind, money blind, power-blind for Jesus' sake?

Would you please join the Elders in praying that God would cause our church to change, to grow, and to develop in such a way that we reflect His heart for ALL people to the ALL people around us for whom Jesus died?

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<sup>17</sup> Acts 13:1 - *Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.*