

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

Who's Your Mommy (with sincere apologies to fathers) Study #8
(Galatians 4:8-31)

Introduction: Lost, but making excellent time...

The first of the Smith guys' excellent adventures in the Rocky Mountains found us traveling to the area north of Durango deep in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado.

I was younger than I am now, and, to their mother's grave concerns, so were my sons, Ben and Zach. We planned to be on the trail for about five days, but Kathy had expressed some concern about her 12- and 14 year old sons' abilities to carry their father back to the car.

Nevertheless, we pulled out of our San Antonio driveway and drove sixteen hours to the wilderness, hitting the trail in fine shape, heading off in the general direction of Engineer Mountain.

The trek began with great hiking in beautiful weather. I checked the map often enough - *I thought* - to make sure we were going in the right direction.

But after a couple of hours, I noticed that the USGS map had some striking errors. (I have since learned to trust the USGS maps. They are - at least in my experience - *never* wrong.)

The stream we were following was on the wrong side of the trail. Not long after that, I noticed that a mountain that should have been due north was actually to our east. And a river we crossed seemed to be flowing in the wrong direction.

To this day, I've never located the trail we hiked during those first three days. I think it was just a game trail we followed after missing a turn that we should have taken on Day One.

Actually, during the first part of our trek I was never quite sure where we were. We enjoyed beautiful scenery, saw lots of wildlife, and generally had a great time. But we were L-O-S-T.

The good news is that while lost, we covered a lot of ground...

Have I just described your spiritual life? Lost, but making excellent time?

Have you ever felt - or do you now feel - like you are "trying harder" but spinning your wheels? Going faster, but unsure of direction? You've re-doubled your effort to make spiritual progress, but have come to wonder if you've taken a detour off the main road and are just following a rabbit trail?

If so, you're going to get some much needed mapping help from the Bible today. That's because we're going to see the spiritual wasteland into which the believers in first century Galatia had wandered.

They were busy, busy, busy - busy for God - but they had lost their way. They had lost their bearings, their centeredness and their spiritual passion because they had abandoned the guiding stars of **GRACE, FAITH, and THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

And the Apostle Paul offers some incredibly helpful counsel for them - and for any of us - who need to get back on the right track.

To begin with, let's take a minute or two and remember life before you began journeying with Jesus. Paul helps jog our memory.

From Slavery to Freedom to Slavery! (vv. 8-11)

SLAVES, Living Like Slaves! (v. 8)

[4:8] However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.

To put it bluntly, “*People who do not know Jesus are in slavery.*”

That’s true for everyone to whom Paul was writing and it is true for everyone here today.

In the first century, Jews who had received the commands of the Mosaic Law had been in slavery to rules and regulations. Non-Jews were slaves, too, though not to a set of rules. They were in slavery to idols - “gods” which are not God.

The Bible tells us that whenever a person gives himself or herself to satisfying an appetite or to pleasing a person or to pursuing a goal RATHER than loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength, that person is practicing *idolatry*.

And, Paul assures us that if anyone is being idolatrous, that person is enslaved.

That was life for you PRIOR to placing your faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. You were a slave. Now you are free in Jesus!

But Paul accuses the Galatians to whom he was writing - who were undeniably **CHRISTIANS** - of reverting to living like the slaves they no longer were!

FREE, Living Like Slaves? (vv. 9-11)

[9] 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? [10] You observe days¹ and months and seasons and years.² [11] I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored³ over you in vain.

¹ “Days” may be a reference to either Jewish (as a result of the influence of the troublemakers) or pagan (with astrological significance).

² Now, it is apparently true that the apostle Paul himself observed special holidays that were required under the Jewish Law. In Acts 20:16, we read that he was hurrying on a journey so that he could observe Pentecost while in Jerusalem (he makes mention of Pentecost again in 1 Corinthians 16:8). But, Paul was not keeping Pentecost so that he could gain favor with God. He certainly was not in the bondage of thinking that by keeping a special day, he would make spiritual progress. This is precisely the thought in Romans 14:5-6. Christians may observe

They were free, but self-enslaved. They were children of the King of Kings living like peasants, heirs of promise living like paupers.

What happened?

The Galatians HAD BEEN ENSLAVED to idols when Paul and Barnabas came to Galatia on the First Missionary Journey with the message that would free them. They trusted in the Lord Jesus and found freedom:

- Freedom FROM the curse that is on everyone who doesn’t keep every last command of God, and freedom TO enjoy the richness of grace;
- Freedom FROM sin’s penalty (Hell) and freedom TO love and serve;

But, their passionate, grace-based, joy-filled relationship with Jesus degenerated into a cold, formal externalism.

False teachers came to Galatia and convinced these new converts that the way to approach God, the way to get right with God, the way to get righter with God, the way to stay right with God was by adhering to a set of rules.

What happened?

Well...

- They forgot that living the Christian life was not a function of earning favor with God. It is all about grace.
- They forgot that Christianity was not a ritual, but was fundamentally about a relationship with a loving, heavenly Father.
- They forgot that being a Christian was not about adopting a lifestyle, but about being adopted by God.

Paul said that the Galatians had reverted to “*days and months and seasons and years*” - reminding them of the kind of observances that had enslaved them in their former lives in either Judaism or paganism.

certain days or not and eat certain foods or not. These actions, though, will not necessarily move us one step closer to maturity, or toward becoming more loving people, the goal of all spiritual effort.

³ He refers to his work as heavy toil. (*κοπιωω*)

They had started out so well. Freed by Jesus, they had basked in His love and grace. The Father's love had done its amazing work on their tired souls. He had energized them for love and service. They knew that they were redeemed sons and daughters of God.

Now? Now they are lost, out in the boonies, off the main trail and bushwhacking through the weeds of legalism.

Sometimes, when you are lost, the best thing to do is to backtrack to the last known place you were when you know you were found. I've used that method on a number of occasions on backpacking trips.

Paul tried it here, backtracking with the Galatians to help them remember how they and he had gotten together in the first place, hoping that remembering those early days might re-ignite memories of better days when they were spiritually healthy.

A Roller-Coaster Relationship (vv. 12-20)

Back Story (vv. 12-16)

[12] I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.⁴ You have done me no wrong; [13] but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; [14] 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. [15] 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.

Great suffering (vv. 12-13)

Evidently, the reason Paul (and Barnabas) ended up in certain parts of the region of Galatia was because he was suffering physically. He detoured into Galatia because he needed medical attention.

⁴ What this statement is likely to mean is something like this: Paul wants the Galatians to emancipate themselves from bondage to law, as he had done, and appeals to them to do this on the ground that he, who possessed the advantages of the law, had foregone them and put himself on the same level, with respect to law, as themselves.

Through the centuries, scholars have guessed (and it has never been more than educated guesses) at Paul's physical infirmity.

Everything has been suggested from **malaria** (supposedly contracted in his journeys through the lowlands of Southern Galatia), to an **eye problem** (presumably dating back to his conversion on the Damascus Road when he was blinded for three days), to **epilepsy** (a common practice in the ancient world was to spit at epileptics to ward off the disease from oneself, and that is what "*loathe*" literally means in verse 14).⁵

Some have supposed that Paul may have looked repulsive, or even may have had some highly contagious disease. But it is evidently not important that we know - because Paul doesn't tell us.

However, the Galatians certainly knew what his bodily illness was! It was this ailment that had prompted him to stop off in at least one of the Galatian cities in which he had founded a church.

Great hospitality (vv. 14-15)

Here he reminds them of how **helpful** and how **loving** they had been when he had been with them.⁶

But their affections toward him have cooled since he had left them. And they have not only cooled toward Paul, they have warmed up to someone else who has come to them with a different kind of message.

Something has changed in the Galatians' posture toward him, and he wants them to know how much that change, that cooling, has hurt and confused him.

B. Love Story (vv. 15-20)

[16] So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?

⁵ Nor can we be sure if the ailment spoken of here is the "thorn in the flesh" of 2 Cor. 12. Although they are likely the same.

⁶ When he says that they would have been willing to pluck out their own eyes if that would have solved his problem, he gives us a pretty big hint that the physical ailment was likely related to eyesight.

[17] They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you will seek them. [18] But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. [19] My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you-- [20] but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Apostolic self-portrayal

Listen to the way Paul describes himself here.

He portrays himself as a zealous suitor of their affections. He had never sought to use or abuse them. He hadn't taken advantage of them. His dealings had been with integrity, tracking with truth.⁷

Then, he speaks as a father who desperately loves his kids, calling them **"my children"**.

Finally, he says that he is **"in labor"** with them until Christ is fully formed in the Galatians - not a fatherly, but a motherly image that communicates the ultimate in affection!

The point? Paul is trying in every way possible to say, *"I love you!"* and *"I want the best for you!"*

Apostolic passion to bless

The idea is for Christians to enter into real joy and freedom in Christ, to listen to God's *"I promise!"* and not to the Law's *"Thou shalt!"* That is what genuine liberty in Christ is all about.

Paul wanted the Galatians to change. He wants you and me to change, too.

Change is hard, desperately hard for most of us. There is really a short list of things that will prompt us to make the decision to change something about ourselves.

We'll change our behavior in response to **PAIN** (that is, we'll stop doing something that causes us pain or will start doing something if the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term gains) and we'll change our behavior in response to **LOVE** and **GRACE** (in response to the love someone has shown us, or because of our love for someone).

So, immediately before Paul urged his audience to a radical change in the way they approached life (GRACE not LAW), he reminded them that they were deeply loved.

Brilliant.⁸

Now, as you and I listen to Scripture, we are listening to what we rightly call "the word of God." Galatians speaks to God's people with God's voice.

And before you listen to the remainder of this passage, and its exhortation to change, hear the good news that the heart of God is turned toward you. He does truly love you. He is for you.

So much of our difficulty with Scripture's commands is that, bottom line, deep down, we aren't convinced that God - who is telling us what to do, and sometimes those are HARD things - has our best interests in mind.

Becoming convinced that God is for us, becoming convinced of the goodness of God, is the first step forward into the life of radical discipleship and it is the first step forward into the life of Christian liberty.⁹

- The troublemakers were trying to convince the Galatians that in order to be "good" Christians, they had to submit to law and follow an external code.
- Paul said that the Christian life hinged on grace and that obedience was to be motivated by gratitude for what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

⁸ If you want someone to change, understand the dynamics of change. Prior to letting somebody have a dose of hard truth, prior to telling someone that you believe they should change, it is important to ensure that the person knows you love them. And, if you don't love them, it is important that you learn to love them as God loves them if you want your message to come to them with life-changing force.

⁹ See Hebrews 11:1-6

⁷ See also 2 Cor. 11:2

Those are two very different approaches to life in Christ. And, to highlight the distinctives, Paul used an Old Testament story¹⁰ with which the Galatians would have been familiar to prove that legalism is a trail leading nowhere.

It is a story with which you, too, should be familiar. It is the story of Abraham and the two women with whom he had children.

Who's Your Mommy? (vv. 21-31)¹¹

A Tale of Two Mothers (vv. 21-23)

[21] Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. [23] But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise."

WANTING to be under law

Paul is writing to a group of people who WANT to be under the Law. They WANT to live on the basis of conformity to an external code.

Can you imagine anyone WANTING to be under Law's thumb? Sure!

I understand. It is easier that way. It is easier to approach life from a rules orientation. Of course, you have to develop an increasingly long list of rules so that there is a rule to cover each and every situation. But, it sure does make life simple.

But life lived on the basis of rules, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" and "You better" and "You better not!" is not as joyful as a life based on grace. It is not as free as a life based on faith. It is not as powerful as a life based on the indwelling Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ These verses presuppose a rather complete knowledge of some Old Testament history. The people mentioned here include Isaac, Ishmael, Hagar, Sarah, Jerusalem, and Sinai!

¹¹ Hebrews 12:18-24 is another passage that speaks to the differences between law and grace, using the symbols of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion.

Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the prodigal son? It is as touching a story as we find in the Gospels. The returning prodigal had it right when he said to his father, "*I am not worthy to be treated as your son.*"

He knew that by his behavior he had forfeited the right to expect that he would be treated as his father's son. The Galatians, though, were saying, "*God, we don't WANT to be treated as Your children. We don't want to be free!*"

The Galatians were - and many Christians today are - like the Prodigal Son. We have been welcomed home and have enjoyed a rich banquet. We put on a ring, sandals and a robe. And then we walk right back to the pigpen to live under law again!

So, Paul writes to get our attention - that is, the attention of all of us who are ever prone to NOT live on the basis of grace and who are sometimes prone to travel the road of rules rather than the road of relationship.

Speaking of Abraham's two wives, he first mentions Hagar, Sarah's maid. You may remember the story...

Hagar

Ten long years after God had promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, Abraham grew impatient and took Hagar, an Egyptian woman, as his second wife.¹² Hagar bore Abraham a son, whom he named Ishmael ("*God hears*"), and you can read that story in Genesis 16.

Sarah

Fifteen years later, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, they welcomed the son God had promised into the nursery they had prepared a quarter of a century earlier!

¹² This was evidently a socially acceptable method of childbearing in Abraham's day - which is not to say that God was prepared to honor it, or fulfill the Promise through Ishmael!

The proud parents named the boy, “Isaac” which means “laughter,” and we can just imagine how much laughter must have filled the tent after all those years of waiting for the promised child (see Genesis 21:1-7).

So Ishmael was born in the due course of nature, and against the will of God. Isaac was born out of nature’s general standard operating procedure, and in the will of God.

A good Bible story - but thus far Paul really hasn’t proved much. He has reviewed history we already knew. We keep reading and watch as the real point of his argument begins to take shape.

A Tale of Two Children

Children of slavery (vv. 24-25)

[24] 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. [25] Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

In Paul’s allegory, Hagar equals Mt. Sinai - the place of the giving of the Law. Mt. Sinai is where the people received the Mosaic Covenant.¹³

Hagar stands for Law. And Paul says that she - like all mothers - bears children who have her nature. All of Hagar’s kids are enslaved to the Law, they are under a code, they look for lists of rules to follow.

By contrast, Christians are Sarah’s offspring, the first and the true wife of Abraham.

The children of freedom (vv. 26-28)

[26] But the Jerusalem above¹⁴ is free; she is our mother.

¹³ Paul is not denying the literal sense of Genesis. In fact, it is the literal meaning that makes the allegory make sense!

¹⁴ “Jerusalem above” equals the community of believers, not a Jerusalem hanging spatially above the earth.

***[27] For it is written,
Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear;
Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor;
For more numerous are the children of the desolate
Than of the one who has a husband.’
[28] And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.”***

Sarah, who had been barren for so long, ends up with a multitude of descendants. Sarah is all about fullness, fruitfulness and joy. Sarah stands for freedom.

In Paul’s allegory, just as Hagar stands for law (legalism), Sarah stands for life in Christ.

And, we who have placed our faith in Jesus are children of Abraham and Sarah, just like Isaac - children of the Promise, supernaturally re-born by the power of God!

Now the first purpose for which Paul gives us this allegory is to get us to see that it is not enough to claim Abraham as our father. We must also claim Sarah as our mother!

The second purpose is to show what freedom-loving, grace-loving people can expect from law and rules and works oriented people.

A Tale of Two Lives (vv. 29-31)

Flesh persecutes freedom! (v. 29)

[29] 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.

Going back to the allegory, Genesis 21 records an interaction between Isaac and Ishmael that Paul uses to preview an inevitable conflict in the life of the Christian and often in the life of the church.

At the weaning ceremony for Isaac, Abraham threw a party. Everyone was happy to see young Isaac growing up - everyone, that is, except his older half-brother, Ishmael. Ishmael was off to the side, mocking Isaac.

Paul takes that mockery, calls it “persecution,”¹⁵ and says that Christians who live according to PROMISE, those who embrace freedom and live like the free sons and daughters of Sarah they are, can expect the same kind of treatment from those who live according to law.

That is exactly what happened to the Galatians. They started walking freely and along came the legalists with a leash.

If YOU decide to live like the true child of Sarah you are, to listen to “I promise” - expect persecution (contempt) from those who are walking according to the flesh.

BUT, when you choose to trust a Person rather than order your life by a set of extra-biblical rules, you take a giant step toward maturity.

Opposition from legalistic people and tendencies toward legalism are not the only dynamics that govern the relationship between Sarah’s kids and Hagar’s kids.

Simply to see the abuse that Ishmael heaped on Isaac would contribute to our having a victim mentality.

The truth, though, is that you, the freedom loving Christian, not the legalist, are in the driver’s seat.

Dealing ruthlessly with legalism! (v. 30)

Back in Genesis 21, after Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac, she marched up to Abraham and demanded that Ishmael leave home!

***[30] 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.***

Over the years, we have read those words, and thought to ourselves, “How love-less that was of Sarah!” Evidently, Abraham had trouble with his wife’s request, too.

¹⁵ Paul considers legalistic treatment persecution. So did Jesus - note His comments about the Pharisees, especially in Matthew 23!

Genesis 21:11 tells us that “*the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son.*” And we can just imagine that it did. For years (seventeen years, if our chronology is correct), Ishmael was the only child in Abraham’s home. He was Abraham’s son.

Sure, Abraham knew that this wasn’t exactly the way God promised he was to have a son, but he must have figured that this was going to be the way it would work out, and he loved Ishmael.¹⁶

But, while Abraham was in mental turmoil as to how he should deal with the situation, God spoke to him, instructing him to do whatever Sarah told him to do.

So, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael packing into the desert, because the son of the promise could not live in the same house as the son born of the flesh.

Paul tells this part of the story for a reason, too. Now it is clear how we are to deal with legalism. Freedom and bondage cannot co-exist.

Paul says, “*Law is dead! Don’t invite Hagar and Ishmael back home for Christmas. They don’t belong in your home any more than they belonged in Abraham’s home.*”

True Christianity and a system of extra-biblical rules and regulations are incompatible. And, we must be as ruthless with legalism as Abraham was in shipping Ishmael out of the house. We are to root out the vestiges of legalism wherever we see it. Never let it get a foothold in your life or in the church.

We are not only sons and daughters of God and sons of daughters of Abraham. We are sons and daughters of Sarah! Our birthright is freedom!

[31] So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

¹⁶ In fact, in Genesis 17:18, when Abraham heard God’s promise for the umpteenth time that he and Sarah would have a child, he blurted out, “*Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!*”

Conclusion:

We want **freedom**, not **shackles**; **grace**, not **legalism** to control our lives. So here is a diagnostic question to apply to your own soul that will help you identify if you have gotten off the trail of grace and on to the detour of legalism. It is the question of **JOY**.

Are you experiencing joy in your obedience to the commands of Jesus?

Obedience to Jesus brings JOY! The absence of JOY signals the presence of legalism.

Drudgery, chronic exhaustion, resentment and low energy for service and love are sure indicators that you have lost your bearings.

If these are your experiences and not JOY, It is time to backtrack, time to re-orient, time to return to the path of grace, faith and life in the Spirit, with the confidence that God is good, loving, and for you!