

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

Free!! Now what...?

(Galatians 5:1-12)

Study #9

Introduction: Forms of freedom...

Have you ever wondered if Benjamin Franklin looked at George Washington after the British General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, and said, *“Well, General, we’re free. Now what?”*

Do you think that they have a good idea as to what would follow after they had liberated themselves from British rule? Did they understand what it would require to live as free people?

Perhaps...

But I can’t help picturing Americans dancing for joy on Boston Commons after their newly won freedom and pausing to ask themselves, *“Wow! So what do we do now that we are free?”*

Christians have been set free through faith in Jesus. That’s GREAT NEWS! Yet in 2009, we might be tempted to ask the same question newly liberated citizens of America were asking in 1781, *“Now what?”*

We’ve got questions:

- What follows emancipation?
- What does a God-liberated life look like?
- What is the freedom being discussed in the book of Galatians?

You know what you mean when you speak of freedom - but maybe what you mean is not at all what I mean when I use the word. I know what I mean by freedom, but maybe you don’t buy what I mean.

Clearly, the founding fathers meant freedom of speech, worship and assembly. When President Franklin Roosevelt spoke of freedom in the 1930’s and 40’s, he meant that Americans should have freedom from want (a chicken in every pot) and from fear. Today, newspaper editors and TV journalists want freedom from constraint in communication. Capitalists understand freedom as the right to buy and sell according to the dictates of a free market.

When the apostle Paul said that Christians are “free,” what did he have in mind? What are we promised when we are promised “freedom in Christ”?

The answer to that question surfaces as we round the corner and begin to head for the homestretch in our study of Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

Don’t Settle For Anything Less Than FREEDOM! (v. 1)¹

The Purpose of Our Freedom (v. 1a)

[1a] It was for freedom that Christ set us free...

That is one radical comment about the purpose of Jesus’ death on the cross. Paul says that our freedom was central to what was in the Lord’s mind as He was dying to purchase our salvation.

Think about it.

When we place our faith in Jesus’ work on the cross, we are set free **FROM** the guilt of our sin, we are released **FROM** the prospect of an eternity in Hell, and we are liberated **FROM** the condemning judgment of God.

¹ Demonstrating that Galatians is uniquely written to emphasize Christian freedom, note the uses of the word “freedom” in the rest of the New Testament: Gal. - 11x; Rom - 7x; 2 Cor. - 8x; rest of Paul - 2x; rest of the N.T. - 13x.

Jesus' longing is that as you and I realize all that from which we have been set free, we will live like the free people we truly are.

And Paul tells us that it is essential that we work hard to "**stand firm**" in the freedom that is ours, to *strive* to stand firm, because there are those who prefer rules-keeping to liberty, those who object to freedom and who will derail us from freedom, given an opportunity.

Fighting for Our Freedom (1b)

[1b]...therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

In the ancient world (and in many places today), a wooden beam was placed between two animals, allowing them to pull a heavy load. This wooden beam was called a "yoke." The animals labor under the yoke, pulling a cart or a plow.

It's a graphic image. Galatians 5:1 tells us that there are people who would like nothing better than to put you under a "yoke." These are the folks who order their lives on the basis of rules and whose twin mottoes are, "*Thou shalt!*" and "*Thou shalt not!*"

As you read about "**a yoke of slavery**" can't you just picture a team of oxen out in the middle of a field on a hot, dry, dusty day, responding to the whip as they pull the plow?

It's hard to conjure up the word "joy" when imagining that scene, isn't it? A more apt word would be "drudgery." To be "under the yoke" as Paul uses the term here, is to be sentenced to a life of drudgery and shackling rules-keeping.

But, as believers in Jesus we are NOT to crawl back under the yoke of slavery to rules. There is a much better way to live - namely, free!²

² Actually, everyone is under a yoke of some kind. A "yoke" is one way of talking about the dominating force in a person's life. Those who don't know Jesus Christ are necessarily under the yoke of sin, the Law, guilt, and the judgment of God. Christians also have a yoke to bear, but it is shared by Jesus (Matt. 11:29-30).

God wants us to enjoy living on the basis of His promises, enjoy being His children, enjoy being welcomed into His presence at any time, enjoy knowing that we always have His ear, and enjoy knowing that we don't have to "measure up" to be accepted.

That is what GRACE is all about. Before we came to Christ by faith, we couldn't measure up. As Christians, what is changed is not that we DO measure up, but that having been adopted into God's family, we don't need to!

God accepts us IN JESUS and He wants us to live as truly free people. That is the target - living as the free people we truly are.

But, what happens if we choose to submit to a rules-based orientation to the Christian life? What if we don't walk by faith, but choose to live by works? What if we abandon grace? The awful reality is that this is a possibility - even for the child of God. That would be to live legalistically.

And Paul goes on to outline the implications of opting for a legalistic way of life.

The Way of Bondage vs. the Way of Freedom (vv. 2-12)

The Horror of Legalism (vv. 2-4, 7-10, 12)

Disastrous results for those who choose "Thou shalt-ism" (i.e. - legalism)

No benefits from Christ? (v. 2)

[2] Behold I, Paul,³ say to you that if you receive circumcision,⁴ Christ will be of no benefit to you.

³ What could be Paul's purpose for re-identifying himself here? Maybe he wants them to especially remember that he is writing to them with the spiritual authority of an apostle on this point.

⁴ Just an aside concerning the rite of male circumcision in the Old Testament. It was given as a sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, after Abraham was justified. And, it was expressly made a part of Israel's corporate life in Leviticus 12, as a part of the Law. But, circumcision never was related to whether a person was saved

Now THAT is a strong statement! But how are we to understand this statement?

Is Paul saying that if someone who has placed trust in Christ for salvation then makes a decision to get circumcised,⁵ thinking that by doing this he was sealing his salvation, or getting closer to God, then he won't be saved anymore?

No!

Here in this passage, Paul isn't addressing eternal salvation. He is speaking to genuinely saved people about the benefit Christ offers them in THIS life.

The point of verse 2 is that someone who is depending on their works to get them in good with God, is actually moving away from an intimate relationship with God!

The reason is transparent. If I am depending on **MY works**, I can't be focused on **JESUS' works!**

Paul is talking to people who have trusted Jesus for salvation. They are saved. Jesus will bring ZERO benefit to a person who submits to legalism in this life.

To the degree that our Christianity is rules-based, as opposed to grace-based, to that extent we have chosen bondage.

And there is more.

Once legalism takes hold of a Christian, the monster doesn't stop until that believer is devoured. In the end, legalism saps the vitality out of a child of God.

Half-way legalism? (v. 3)

[3] And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.⁶

The Mosaic Law was never intended to be the moral equivalent of a cafeteria line. A Christian can't decide he will follow the Law here and not there. Nor, I believe, is it possible to remain for long, "a little bit legalistic."

Once we start to put ourselves under a set of rules of behavior for trying to get right/stay right with God, the "rules monster" becomes unstopable. "Law" takes over a life.

To drift away from grace is to start down a path that enslaves. Once the slavery begins, it will continue and become increasingly severe.

Christians in 2009 who measure their growth as believers by what THEY do step onto a treadmill that is guaranteed to end in untold crazy-making, because the focus is all wrong.

Starting with the best of intentions to do really good things (give generously, pray fervently, read our Bibles consistently, etc...) those helpful and wholesome disciplines degenerate into legalisms by which we think we commend ourselves to God, or wrench a blessing from Him.

It doesn't have to end that way! But, if we are not careful, we will wind up looking at what WE do as the key to our standing before God, rather than to what JESUS has already done as the key.

Paul makes clear that there is no freedom or benefit in that.

Then, in the most severe language Paul uses in the book (maybe in all of his writings), he tells us that Christians who travel the road of legalism have taken a long walk off a short pier.

or not. It was only in the days of the New Testament that the Jews mistakenly linked it with justification.

⁵ "Circumcision" can stand for any legalistic approach to life; observe a Jewish festival, keep the Jewish dietary code or any of a number of other rules that don't need to apply to Christians.

⁶ See James 2:10 and Romans 2:25 for the same thought

Fallen from grace? (v. 4)

[4] You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Remember what Paul is teaching us in this passage. He is speaking about the benefits Christ offers believers **IN THIS LIFE**.

The audience he has in mind as he writes is clearly saved (he calls them “brethren” throughout the book).⁷

The concern, though, is that Christ and His grace might be - **ON EARTH** - worthless because they have refused to avail themselves of that grace!

Does Paul mean here that:

- a legalistic Christian is no longer a Christian?
- a legalistic child of God is un-adopted?
- a legalistic redeemed slave to sin is un-ransomed?

NO!

Christians who live according to Law don’t cease to be Christians. But, they do cut themselves off from the power of Christ. They place themselves outside of the working sphere of His grace!⁸

And there is a grave danger that we all need to be aware of when we read these words: It is that we would hear such severe language and automatically assume that Paul must be speaking to and about someone else.

I might assume that he couldn’t be referring to me. You might assume that he couldn’t be referring to you.

Or could he...?

Let me pose some diagnostic questions that may help determine if you have slipped into the prison of legalism.

Has your attention been most fixed, lately, on how well you are doing or on what Jesus has done for you?

Have you been thinking more and more about the fact of Jesus’ love for you, or more and more about whether you are measuring up to your self-imposed standards of what a Christian should look like?

Are you consciously relying on Jesus these days, or are you relying on what you used to rely on prior to placing your faith in Jesus to make life work?

If you are fixated on how well you are doing, focused on whether or not you are measuring up or relying on anyone or anything other than Jesus, then the person Paul is describing here is YOU. Christ isn’t benefiting you, because you have ceased to depend on Him.

You have substituted the intimacy of a relationship with the Lord for the sterility of a set of rules, and have exchanged the biblical view of the Christian life - a Person to trust - for another - a code to which you submit!

In these verses, Paul addresses the folly of falling for a “*Look at what I’ve done*” kind of Christianity. But he also has very strong words aimed at those who might be guilty of leading others into a rules-based Christian life.

Disastrous results for those who lead others into “Thou shalt-ism” (vv. 7-10, 12)

Who derailed you? (vv. 7-10a)

[7] You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? [8] This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. [9] A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. [10] I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view [than what I am teaching!]

⁷ See the following verses for validation that they were saved: 1:6, 9; 2:2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 26; 4:7, 9.

⁸ Phillips’ paraphrase

A PICTURE OF DERAILEMENT...

Quite a few years ago I drove with a High School track athlete named Glen Boronow who went to Northwest to Brackenridge Park to participate in a locally sponsored 5K run. Glen was going to race and I was going to get some exercise.

It was raining and a little bit cold on that day, but when the gun sounded, all got off to good starts.

I watched as the young jackrabbits bounded on down the trail in front of me. I had a leisurely run and finished ahead of some, but behind most - but Glen (a very fast runner) was nowhere to be seen.

It turned out that he and three other High School aged guys, way out in front of the rest of us, had been misdirected by a poorly informed race official as to the route of the race.

They took this official's advice as gospel - which was WRONG! - and added about a mile to their run. They finished behind even ME, because they were derailed from the true course.

The Galatians had gotten off to a good start in their Christian lives. They were running, as if in a 5K, straight toward the truth. But someone had directed them off the proper course away from grace and into legalism.

They were still running well, just in the wrong direction. (As we saw last week, they were "lost, but making excellent time")

Just like that unhelpful race official destroyed any hopes for a good finish for Glen, legalists have a tremendous influence when they are allowed to hold sway in any local assembly of believers.

THE IMAGE OF LEAVEN...

In fact, their influence is disproportionately huge in comparison to their numbers. That is why Paul uses the image of "leaven."⁹ There is a significant "leavening" influence wherever legalists arise.

⁹ In Scripture, leaven is typically (although not always) symbolic of sin. Leaven was cast out of Jewish homes before Passover, for the making of the unleavened

Leaven is helpful in baking. Mixed in with the dough, it infiltrates and permeates and saturates the lump. Leaven (yeast) is what causes the dough to rise.

But legalists are a sinking leaven in the life of a church. Like leaven, they infiltrate, permeate, and saturate until all hints of grace and beauty and life and joy are gone. And what is left is a dry, sterile, stale conformity to a code that attracts no one to Jesus.

Legalists are like weeds. They don't know when to quit. Give a weed an inch, and it'll take your yard. Give legalism an inch in your life, and it'll take over your life.

And, if legalists are given a foothold in a church, they will eventually destroy the beauty and freedom and vitality of that fellowship.

Legalism piles on rules and codes. Legalism rarely mentions FAITH. GRACE is put on the back burner. And in the end, "freedom" in any meaningful sense no longer exists.

THE LEGALISTIC CHURCH...

What do you figure a legalistic church looks like? What does the church look like where the leaven of legalism has saturated?

I suspect that the mood of a legalistic church will be one of two extremes.

Either there will be an arrogance and pride over the fact that the right things are being done, (*"Look at us, aren't we doing great!"*) or a defeatist sense of stagnation because of repeated failures to "measure up" (*"We're such losers!"*).

The focus in the church caught in the snare of legalism is on what they have done - not on the wonderful work Jesus accomplished on the cross and not on the wonderful things He is doing in their midst NOW.

bread, and leaven was not allowed in sin and burnt offerings of the Old Testament. See also Mt. 16:6 and 1 Cor. 5:6-8 for other symbolic references to leaven. However, it is symbolic in a good way in Matthew 13.

One thing is for certain, there will certainly be no JOY.

The legalistic church lacks the vitality to impact its community for Jesus. Color the legalistic church dull, gray, drab.

And what is the church like where people are living in the freedom Christ died to bring it?

THE FREE CHURCH...

Well, the members there are acutely aware of their sin, their failings, and their shortcomings. But when they see their sin, they are driven to a gripping appreciation for the cross of Christ.

They fixate on God's promises, and base their obedience to God's commands on Jesus' work and their future in Heaven.

They will engage in special projects and efforts, but these seasons of special effort arise from a passion to serve the Lord and to bless people, not from a misguided thought that they will ensure their salvation, or from an exhausted sense that they "ought to do 'X'."

From time to time they falter, sure - and are repentant over their failures. But, out of their brokenness and repentance comes God's strength. They are willing to challenge each other to hard steps of obedience, but they are accepting of where the other person is in his or her pilgrimage.

And, because these folks' main focus in life is on Jesus' work, the only work that saves, they are *filled* with life AND *give* life to a watching world. Color this church with the beauty of a rainbow!

What a contrast! The legacy of legalism is a spiritual wasteland. The fruit of freedom is LIFE!

And that is why Paul speaks with such passion about the importance of standing firm in the freedom that Christ won for us.

Some people believe that the Bible is a dull or dry book, devoid of strong emotion. But these people have forgotten what Jesus said in Matthew 23 to the Pharisees and scribes.¹⁰

They have forgotten what David said in some of his Psalms about the enemies of God.¹¹

And maybe they haven't read what Paul said about the legalists in Galatians 5, verses ten and twelve.

Future of the derailers! (vv. 10b, 12)

[10b]...but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is...[12] I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate¹² themselves.¹³

There's a VERY graphic picture - meant figuratively, I am sure! But the meaning is crystal clear. Paul doesn't want these bondage-makers reproducing!

Just as the Lord's strongest statements were reserved for the complacent, condescending legalist, so Paul lets fly with a little fire here. His strongest words are reserved for the legalists in Galatia.

So far today we have recognized legalism for the ugly thing it is and legalists for the leaven they are. We have rejected legalism.

But just as the patriots in Boston in 1781 might have asked, "We're free! - now what?" so we look to Paul and ask, "What is our Christian freedom good for?"

Ready? Here goes.

¹⁰ See Matthew 23:1-39 for Jesus' stinging condemnation of the legalistic Pharisees.

¹¹ See Psalm 137, which includes the following, written about the children of God's enemies - "**How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock.**" (v. 9). Also, see Psalm 83:13-18.

¹² The word "mutilate" means castrate.

¹³ Yet even this statement was not primarily sourced in hatred for the troublemakers as much as it was one of love for God, and love for the Galatians.

The Beauty of Our Freedom (vv. 5-6)

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

This is the one thing that matters to God - that we trust Him, and that our trust in Him work itself out in love toward Him and others!¹⁴

Any idea about how Christians grow that puts more emphasis on conforming to a code than trusting a Person is wrong, mis-directed and headed for the rocks.

Growing as a believer involves something other than following a set of rules.

It primarily involves relating to a Sovereign God, submitting to His dealings with us, gambling everything on Him, and trusting that He knows what He is doing even when nothing about us or our lives seems to be making sense.

FAITH is crucial to growth.

As well, any theory about what maturity looks like that doesn't have **LOVE** heading the list is off target.

Jesus demonstrated the centrality of love when He summarized His teachings on the night before He died. In this summary He gave one New Commandment - that we are to love one another on the example He set for us: *sacrificially*.

Knowledge is not the essence of spiritual maturity. Neither is social poise leadership acumen or theological brilliance.

The one undeniable and irreplaceable and irresistible mark of progress in the spiritual life is love.

¹⁴ We know from elsewhere that *“without faith it is impossible to please God”* (Heb. 11:6) and that faith, hope, and love abide *“but the greatest of these is love”* (1 Cor. 13:13).

The actions of a growing Christian are increasingly energized by love for others.

He is increasingly committed to laying down his life for his friends - and even for his enemies.

She asks, even when she doesn't feel loved or treated with respect, not how she can effectively retaliate, but how she can lovingly relate.

Mature people have begun to grasp what Paul says here about what matters: that trusting God and loving is what we were made for and what we were freed for.

Conclusion:

Paul has been making the case in Galatians that we are free - and that is tremendous news!

We are free FROM all sorts of horrible, destructive things. Thank God for our liberty in Jesus! NOW he lets us know that we are free TO pursue certain things, too.

Today, we have heard him tell us the great news that we are free to TRUST HIM and we are free to LOVE.

While a commitment to LOVE and SERVE necessarily involves sacrifice and giving and pain, there is nothing more attractive than a loving life. There is nothing that draws people to Jesus like our love.

When those around you get a glimpse of your self-sacrificing, compassionate service for others, they will be intrigued. When friends at school, business associates, and extended family see you love they will be attracted to the light you are shining.

The beauty of the Gospel shines most attractively through **LOVING LIVES**.

Friends, seeing all that God has done for us in Jesus, and all that we have been freed FROM, let's run INTO the liberating life of **LOVE!**