

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Leaving the Chains Behind

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Resisting the Temptation to Choose Chains

(Introduction; Galatians 1:1-9)

Study #1

Introduction: For want of freedom...

All over the world, people go to extremes to escape chains and bondage, slavery and oppression.

Since 2011, hundreds of thousands of people have left their homeland of Syria with nothing more than they could carry on their backs.

They have left because life was simply intolerable under the brutal Assad regime. Many of these refugees have fled to Europe. Lots have come to the US.

Many thousands more are leaving what is referred to as the "Northern Triangle" of Central America: Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala. They are risking life and limb to get away from the gangs and the drug cartels that have wrecked these countries.

Again, many of these are escaping and looking for freedom in the US, while some are moving to Mexico and Belize, or south to Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

And every year, brave souls risk their lives to cross a frozen river to leave the oppression of North Korea and to enter the countries of Russia or China.

The more we learn about the people who are facing such oppression, the more our hearts break for them.

And we understand why people suffering the kinds of things these people suffer would take the risks they take and take dangerous journeys to escape and to find freedom. Freedom is that precious.

Of course, our lives aren't perfect here in the US - the Garden of Eden is gone and Heaven's not yet - but we here in the States do enjoy freedoms people in these and other places don't.

The reality that many, many people in many, many places are deprived of basic freedoms is both a tragedy AND an affront to life as God intended it.

We feel it deep in our souls. We long for political freedom and for the freedom of self-determination. We want freedom to come and go as we please, freedom to choose, to pursue our passions.

God hard-wired us for freedom, and when we're not free, we hunger for it. We know something is missing.

In Jesus, God offers us a freedom that is more core than politics and economics.

He offers us freedom from the penalty and the power of sin. The good news - Gospel - tells us that Jesus breaks the chains that bind us. He liberates us from a life of slavery to our appetites and sets us free to a life with God in the Spirit marked by love.

Freedom is the gift God wants to give us.

Beginning this morning and continuing for a couple of months, we are going to be looking into what was probably the earliest letter we have written by the Apostle Paul. This letter's theme is freedom.

When we come to Christ by faith and receive the gift of eternal life, we are set free from sin's condemnation. Those chains are gone.

Then, every day, for the rest of our lives, we have the choice of submitting to sin's demands, or submitting to the Spirit's leadership, putting the shackles back on or living by grace.

In this letter we're going to explore, Paul was writing to a group of people who had recently started their journey with Jesus and were being tempted to revert to slavery. His message? Life free!

But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself.

The letter I'm referring to is the letter to the churches of Galatia. And before saying anything else, I'd like to set the setting of Galatians by walking you through some early church history.

The Early Spread of Jesus' Gospel

From Antioch to VERY Remote Places (Acts 1-14)

The Jesus movement began in Jerusalem, the place where Jesus died and rose again. But from the start, it was never to end there.

Jesus' vision and His mission was global, and within a few short years, the mandate of Acts 1:8 turned into a prophecy that was slowly being fulfilled.

The Gospel of Jesus spread from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then on to increasingly remote parts of the world.

About fifteen years after Jesus' death, a vibrant Christian community was established in the Syrian city of Antioch.¹

¹ It was due to the testimony of the Antioch church that believers were first given the title, Christ-Ones/Christians. They had grown into a stable, active, spiritually alive congregation by the mid-40's of the first century. What a tragedy that one of the first Gospel outposts - Syria - has become such a site of suffering today.

The church in Antioch² was profoundly diverse in ethnic make-up.

It may be due to that diversity that this church had a heart to reach out to diverse groups of people who had never heard the good news about Jesus.

So, the church commissioned two of its members - Barnabas and Saul (whom we know better as Paul) - to travel to some of these remote areas.

Paul and Barnabas sailed from Antioch to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus and then north to the area we know today as Turkey and headed inland.

They spread the Gospel, primarily, to people living in four cities: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

They evangelized. They made disciples. God performed miracles of healing and saved people's souls. The Spirit of God transformed lives and families and even whole communities.

Along the way, Paul and Barnabas faced opposition. At least one riot broke out. There was rejection of the message and the messengers. In Lystra, Paul was stoned nearly to death.

But, at the end of the day, those who had received the Gospel and had believed in Jesus formed communities of faith - we call them churches - and the message continued to spread after the missionaries returned to Antioch.³

Paul and Barnabas took Acts 1:8 (remotest part of the earth) more seriously and more sacrificially than it had ever been taken.

People who had never heard the name "Jesus" were saved by Jesus. Their lives were changed. And all of this happened in the region Paul refers to as *Galatia*.

² Today, Antakya.

³ You can read about this journey (the First Missionary Journey) in Acts 13-14.

The Remote Area in Question: Galatia

Geography

The Galatian⁴ region through which Paul traveled is now the country of Turkey.⁵

It's rough, rugged country, plagued by dust storms, locust infestations, frequent droughts, blistering summer heat (sound familiar?), and bitter cold winters.

Peoples

It's tricky to pin down the kinds of people who lived in this region, and historians argue about what ethnic groups were there.

"Galatia" derives from the word "Gaul" or "Celt", a group of tribes that was originally located in what is now Eastern Europe.

The Gauls migrated north as far as the British Isles and south and east as far as Asia Minor and Turkey.⁶

⁴ "Galatian" is a variant form of the word "Celtic" as in the "Celts" we usually associate with Britain. The Galatians (Gauls/Celts) were originally native to the region around the Baltic Sea and what is today, Eastern Europe.

⁵ In the ancient world, the term "Galatia" was used in two ways. It sometimes referred to the region inhabited by ethnic Galatians in the northern part of present-day Turkey. These ethnic Galatians ruled over the Phrygians and the Cappadocians, and had the reputation of being highly superstitious, extremely cruel, and horribly immoral. The term "Galatia" also referred to a Roman province, which, by New Testament times, stretched from the Black Sea in the north, to the Mediterranean Sea in the south. This province included areas that weren't particularly "Galatian", ethnically. I believe that Paul is using the term in this second way in his letter.

⁶ Two centuries before the writing of Galatians, there is evidence that the Gauls / Celts were very wealthy. They lived in tribes, each tribe ruled by a king-like figure, and were largely independent of each other, living in well-organized societies. They could be counted on, though, to band together against a non-Gallic enemy (like Rome) and fight ferociously.

So, it is likely that Paul and Barnabas met ethnic Gauls/Celts along the way. And the Gauls were a proud people with a long history of military success, very well-organized, and fiercely independent.

But, at the time of their journey, this region was also occupied by Romans, Greeks, Phrygians, Pisidians, Lycaonians, and Jews.

For Paul and Barnabas, the Galatian trip was similar to a trip we might take to HEB where we'll run into Anglos, Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and Middle Easterners. Beautiful diversity, and lots of it.

But going to Galatia was way more threatening than a trip to the store, a fact that may help explain why a missions trip that started with three quickly became two.

Character

For reasons that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, doesn't mention, just prior to heading into Galatia, John Mark - who was Paul's and Barnabas' helper on this journey - left to go home.

I have long wondered if John Mark wanted nothing to do with what they were heading into? Did he know of Galatia's reputation for toughness? Did he suspect the trouble that, in fact, did come?⁷

Taking the Christian message through Galatia and to the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe would be hard. Very hard.

So why do it? Why go to a place that is hard and to people who are going to be resistant to what you have to offer?

Well, they had a command from Jesus. He said, "**Go!**" - and they went.

⁷ Not that this would have been an excuse to "abandon ship" of course. But, it might explain his actions.

But, when Paul was actually addressing the purpose of their trip while speaking in Galatia, in the city of Pisidian Antioch, he didn't mention Jesus' command, but the benefit that faith in Jesus brings.

[Acts 13:38] "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and [39] through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

They went because they knew that when the power of the Gospel is applied to the need of the enslaved, bound up, shackled, human heart, freedom follows.

Paul saw the spiritual bondage people were in who had never tasted God's grace through faith in Jesus.

He wanted to see them trust Christ, leave the chains behind, exchange laws and rules for a walk with God into a Spirit-driven, grace-based freedom.

That's why Paul and Barnabas went to Galatia. Why, though, did Paul write this letter?

Why Did Paul Write Galatians?

Suffering Leads to Gospel Gains

Jesus suffered tremendously on the cross for these Galatians. Paul suffered greatly to bring them the message of Jesus.

So, after all he went through for their sakes, Paul had a vested interest in seeing that the Galatians stayed on course when it came to following Jesus.

He wrote this letter because of evidence that they were NOT staying the course.⁸ Here's my best attempt at putting together the story of what happened that prompted Paul to sit down and write.⁹

About the time that he and Barnabas returned from their missionary activity, some Christian Jews came from Judea to Antioch, with a peculiar teaching.

Gospel Losses Quickly Mount

Troublesome visitors

They said, ***[Acts 15:1] "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."***

These guys were combining the old system of Judaism with the new message of Christianity.

Their teaching (let's call it, "*Jesus and ___ = eternal life*") clashed with what Paul and Barnabas taught AND with what they had just seen happen in Galatia.

Lots of people trusted in Jesus and were justified before God without submitting to circumcision, obeying the Mosaic Law, or doing anything beyond putting their faith alone in Christ alone.

⁸ Some of the Jews to whom Paul and Barnabas preached, believed and became stalwarts of the churches in Galatia. But, the others who opposed the Gospel were similar in outlook and mindset to those Jews who opposed Jesus at every turn in the Gospels. And if they weren't called "Pharisees" they were certainly pharisaical. As these Jews were stirring up trouble behind Paul at every turn, I suspect that they continued stirring up trouble after he left and were cousins to the troublemakers who showed up at Antioch, Syria.

⁹ Paul's letter to the Galatians has had a profound impact on the men and women who have changed their worlds for Christ. Martin Luther, whose commentary on Galatians helped fan the flames of the Protestant Reformation, wrote, "*Galatians is my wife. I have betrothed myself to her. She is my Katie von Bora.*"

The trouble with a “Jesus and...” message

Paul knew that a message demanding anything other than trusting reliance on the Jesus who died and rose again was no Gospel at all. And he accused the men from Judea of being *troublemakers*.

I believe that men like these who were causing trouble in Syrian Antioch, were also causing trouble in the province of Galatia, where Paul and Barnabas had just planted four vibrant, thriving churches.

As soon as he heard about these guys teaching a “Jesus and ___ ” message, he sat down and wrote a letter - Galatians - to remind them of the truth of the Gospel.¹⁰

He starts the letter off on a strong foot, telling his readers that he didn’t win a popularity contest to become Jesus’ apostle. He wasn’t nominated and then voted in to office.

No, writing from Antioch with brothers surrounding him (probably including Barnabas, whom the Galatians knew well), he affirms that his apostleship was given to him by God.

When Crystal Clear Gets Very Muddy (1:1-9)

Starting Off on a Strong Foot (vv. 1-5)

Apostleship bestowed (vv. 1-2)

[1:1] 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), [2] and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia...

¹⁰ In short form, here is my chronology: (1). Paul and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch from the famine visit to Jerusalem described in Acts 11; (2). They embarked on the First Missionary Journey and returned to Antioch; (3). Reports of Judaizers working in the Galatian churches founded by them come to the missionaries; (4). Paul writes Galatians from Antioch of Syria; (5). The Jerusalem council was held shortly after the writing of Galatians.

Paul is not getting up on his high horse so that he can boss people around. He defends his apostleship so that he can defend the Gospel.¹¹

And what he is about to say in six chapters, he summarizes in one sentence.

Galatians, summarized (vv. 3-5)

[3] Grace to you and peace¹² from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave Himself for our sins, that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, [5] to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

Eternal life is a gift of grace, given to those who believe. The dividend grace pays is peace.

Spiritual liberation doesn’t come as we and God work together. No. God rescues people like us, who are helpless to rescue ourselves.

That’s the Gospel. It is a beautifully simple, crystal clear message. Paul’s writing because the waters in Galatia have very quickly gotten very muddy.

These people who have been set free are returning to chains.

It’s like people who have been rescued from the oppression of a North Korea are seeking a way back in, like refugees are looking for a way to return to Bashar al-Assad’s Syria.

¹¹ The troublemakers were maintaining that Paul’s apostleship came from man, as they contradicted his teachings in Galatia. Paul sets the record straight here and reminds the Galatians of his true commission.

¹² Paul is upset as he writes this letter. It is well-reasoned and brilliantly logical, but there is an emotional “edge” to Galatians - especially to the first chapter. In many of his letters, there is an introductory commendation for faithfulness. There is in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy and Titus. There is none of that here.

A Big, Fat Fly in the Ointment (vv. 6-9)

Deserting the One who called you (v. 6)

[6] I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting¹³ Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel

Paul was bitterly disappointed that the Galatians had abandoned **“the grace of Christ.”** To describe that desertion/defection, he used a military term that described the Benedict Arnolds of the ancient world.

And notice. He did not fault them for deserting the Gospel (which they did), but for deserting God (**“deserting HIM who called you”**) for a **“different [kind of a] Gospel.”**

Those disturbing distorters (v. 7)

[7] which is really not another;¹⁴ only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The Gospel the troublemakers were preaching was not another similar, but slightly different, new and improved, Gospel. It was an entirely different sort of gospel.

The false Gospel Paul accused the Galatians of falling for said that they had to finish what Jesus began.¹⁵ That is the essence of all **“Jesus and ____”** Gospels.

The Gospel says faith alone in Christ alone saves forevermore. It saves people who don’t deserve to be saved. It justifies people as a gift - because Jesus paid it all.

¹³ “Deserting” (*μετατιθημι*) - Jude 4; Heb. 11:5; Heb. 7:12

¹⁴ The word that we translate “another” in verse 7 is a different Greek word than the word for “another” he used in verse 6! The word in verse 6 meant *“another of a different kind.”* The word in verse 7 means *“another of the same kind.”*

¹⁵ When Jesus said, from the cross, **“It is finished”** He meant, **“It is finished.”** There was no work left for Him or anyone else to do.

Embracing that Gospel brings peace. Embracing a message that says, **“Jesus and ____”** violates grace. And once you violate grace you can have no peace.

Here in the introduction, Paul doesn’t give us the particulars of the Galatian **“Jesus and ____”** Gospel.

But since the letter has so much to say about *grace* and *faith* and *life in the Spirit*, the false Gospel is no doubt all about the opposite. The false Gospel is about trusting in works to gain eternal life and relying on rules-keeping to beef up our status before God.

The Galatians gobbled up that junk food, with the result that they were, Paul says, **“disturbed.”**

There are a couple of different ways to be disturbed.

One way is to be disturbed and know that you are disturbed. If you see a movie that’s way scarier than you bargained for, you’re disturbed by it, won’t get to sleep, will feel agitated.

But someone who falls for a lie (like, *“The holocaust didn’t happen”* or *“People with different skin color are inferior”*) is disturbed and doesn’t know it.

A child who lives in a dysfunctional home filled with violence and deceit and addictions is disturbed, but believes his experience is normal. He’s disturbed and doesn’t know it.

Christians who have fallen for the lie that life in Jesus is all about rules-keeping and measuring up and better-nots and do’s and don’ts (legalism) have been disturbed by a lie and don’t even know it.

That was what happened to the brand-new Christians in Galatia. It has happened through the centuries and it keeps on happening today.

The Apostle Paul was desperate to rescue his friends - then and now - from this disturbing teaching.

So, lest anyone ignore his concerns, he attacked those who would present any message other than the simple, beautiful Gospel that sets us free.

Listen carefully and you may be shocked. Paul pulls no punches. He is playing hardball and he goes after the troublemakers with all the fervor he can muster.

Keep it simple (vv. 8-9)

[8] But even though we, or an angel from heaven,¹⁶ should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.¹⁷[9] 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, he is to be accursed.

Paul is not being terribly open-minded here.¹⁸ There's no sense of, "You have your Gospel and I have mine, and that is fine." No.

This expansive, flexible, broad-minded, culturally eclectic man was as narrow as a rail when it came to the content of the Gospel.

The practical downside of a "Jesus + ____" Gospel.

Paul knew that a gospel that consisted of salvation by law-keeping, or a perspective on the Christian life that was dependent on what WE can do to maintain our status before God was a terrible trap.

It wouldn't bring glory to God, and it wouldn't provide freedom to those who followed it.

¹⁶ Why "angel / messenger from Heaven"? Perhaps he wants the Galatians to recall when he and Barnabas were mistaken for gods in Lystra (Acts 14).

¹⁷ In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word - accursed - denoted something devoted to destruction (under the ban). See Joshua 6:21.

¹⁸ This is the same Paul who would later say, "**I have become all things to all men.**" (1 Corinthians 9) He's not looking for points of contact between his Gospel and that of the Judaizers.

So...Paul took a stand. Some things are worth fighting for. And for this - the simple Gospel - Paul drew a line and declared war on the "Jesus and..." teachers.

Fighting words!

Twice in two verses he calls down God's curse on them.¹⁹

There is debate among scholars as to what Paul meant to say by his use of the word "**accursed**" (*anathema*). But, the word is used in other places in the New Testament, and it means "accursed."

Paul couldn't have gotten much more forceful than this.

Don't tamper with the Gospel. Don't take anything away from it and don't add anything to it.

Faith alone in Christ alone saves. Period. End of story. Beautiful.

Anything subtracted from the Gospel cheapens the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and His glorious resurrection. Anything substituted or changed keeps people who are far from God away from God. Anything added sends Christians back into bondage.

Conclusion:

So, here we are, a relatively sophisticated congregation in Northwest San Antonio, Texas, 2018.

We're giving ourselves to the systematic study of a short letter written in the first century by a then more or less unknown Jewish Christian to obscure little congregations tucked away in the remote wildness of ancient Galatia.

Why study this letter?

¹⁹ See Romans 9:3 for another use of this word (*anathema*), where Paul says that if it were possible he himself would be willing to be separated from Christ if by so doing he could see his fellow-Jews come to faith in Jesus.

I'm launching into this study because I believe that there is a point of connection between us in the 21st century and those in the 1st.

I see my own inner Galatian. Everything Paul writes about in this letter, speaks to me.

I see my need for a renewed focus on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, for a re-centering on God's grace and a re-commitment to walk by faith.

The good news is that the Good News is simple. It's uncomplicated enough for a child to grasp and embrace, and profound enough to capture a genius' imagination for a lifetime.

That's Gospel. It was Gospel to first century Galatians and it's Gospel to us in 2018.