

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 14, 2018)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Leaving the Chains Behind

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

“Adulging” in Jesus

(Galatians 4:1-11)

Study #6

Introduction: Growing up is hard to do...

English speakers love to turn nouns into verbs. There was rain before it *rained* and there was *Google* before we *googled*.

Around 2015, another verb burst on in on our vocabulary. There have always been adults. Now, there is *adulging*.

To “adult” is to do things adults to. It is to act like an adult.¹

People in their teens or twenties are *adulging* when they change a tire or change oil in the car, fix breakfast, pay taxes, buy a lawn mower, get super pumped about a refrigerator. That kind of stuff.

First forays into adulging are exciting. Healthy. Life affirming. And all of us - of whatever age - could stand to do more adulging, present company included.

Surely, mature adults don't lose it, emotionally, when they get a glimpse of wildlife they haven't seen before.

But when, for the first time ever, I saw a bear out in the wild on last weekend's backpacking trip to Big Bend National Park, I couldn't contain my excitement. You would have thought I was a kid of five.

I think you would have smiled to see my childish side at the sight of a bear. Other glimpses of my non-adult side are less cute.

On that trip, I complained incessantly about the unbelievable swarms of mosquitos at Big Bend. Mature adults don't gripe and whine.

I have developed a few grown-up financial habits. But I still regularly lose receipts the bookkeeper in our home would like to see.

Getting exercise and eating healthy are things that mature adults do. They don't stop and get junky fast food on a whim. I've been upset lately that the MacDonald's on Guilbeau is getting a facelift because it means that I can't stop and get an ice cream cone on the way home from church. I have to cross the street and get a Wendy's Frosty, instead.

Yes, very mature.

My point here is that advancing in years doesn't guarantee maturity and that growing old isn't the same thing as growing up.

Growth, physically, happens. Growing up is intentional. Maturity is fought for when it comes to food and exercise and drink and character. Aging is a given; maturity is not.

Maturity is also not a “given” based on time in the Christian faith. It is possible to be a decades-old toddler in Jesus. And then I've known some two-year-old Christians who are quite mature. Maturity hinges on how intentional we are to take “next steps” with Jesus.

That's the way it is today and that's the way it was for the people the Apostle Paul was writing to in Galatia. They were getting older in Jesus every day, but they weren't growing up.

So, this morning, Paul is going to lead them and us into the exciting journey of “adulging” in Jesus.

¹ Kate Steinmetz, Time Magazine, June, 2016. Steinmetz' research uncovered a 2008 tweet that used the word, but it (the use of the word, not adult behavior 😊) became much more common beginning in about 2015.

Review...

Before we go there, though, let's take a minute to review some of what we have seen so far in Galatians...

- First, eternal life is offered to us as a gift that cost Jesus His life.
- Two, it's important to stand for truth, even if that means standing against friends, like Paul did against Simon Peter and Barnabas.
- Three, faith, not works, is what sparks change and growth.

And then last week, in looking at the last half of Galatians 3, Jeff gave an excellent message dealing with the ugliness of legalism. Legalism is an attempt to improve our standing before God or others, based on our good works.

As Jeff made clear we stand before God because we have trusted God's promise - faith alone in Christ alone! - and not because we have obeyed a set of "Thou shalt's" and "Thou shalt not's."

We could say a lot of things about legalism. It violates love. It ignores the cross. It discounts the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a form of self-imprisonment. It destroys relationships.

We could also say that to choose legalism is to choose immaturity.

So, to urge us to maturity in Jesus, Paul describes the shift that has taken place for everyone who believes in Jesus from spiritual childhood to spiritual adulthood.

Treated as Children (vv. 1-3)

The Bondage of the Roman Child (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave² although he is owner of everything, [2] but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.

² Doulos (Greek - Δουλος), the word used for slave here, signifies a permanent relationship of servitude to another.

When Paul wrote this letter, there were about sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. Everybody in Galatia reading this letter knew all about slavery.

The scourge of slavery is rampant in our world today. In many places, slavery is on the rise, and the 21st century slave trade and human trafficking makes Paul's comment very relevant.

Slaves have no rights or freedoms. That's the way it is today, it's the way it was in our own country when there was shameful, racially-based slavery, and that was the way it was in ancient Rome.

The slave population consisted mostly of conquered peoples. These slaves were very often owned for the explicit purpose of abuse.

While there were improvements to the lives of slaves by the time of the first century,³ one thing didn't change. A slave still had no economic rights, no social privileges, and no political freedoms. The slave was still considered property of an owner.

And in that, a young child in the Roman Empire was little different than a slave.

Until a child reached the age of fourteen, he was under constant supervision by "**guardians and managers**" or tutors.⁴ The tutor regulated the child's life from morning till night. He shadowed him, scolded him, disciplined him, taught him.

A child might stand to inherit a lot of money, might even be in line to receive a kingdom. But as long as he was a minor, he had no more rights and freedoms than a slave.

Paul says, "*As in the physical world, so in the spiritual.*"

³ 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" from The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 5, p. 458, "Slavery" by A. Rupprecht, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.

⁴ This was the "tutor" (παιδαγωγος), referenced in Galatians 3:24.

The Bondage of the Spiritual Child (v. 3)

Some two thousand years before Jesus was born, God chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation.

Over time, Abraham's family grew large. When it grew much larger, his family was enslaved in Egypt.

After four hundred years in Egyptian bondage, God led them to freedom, and the nation of Israel was birthed through the Red Sea at the Exodus.

Very quickly after they landed on the other side of the Red Sea, God gave them the Mosaic Law, a guide - a tutor - to how they could lead lives that honored Him.

Now, before reading what Paul says next, understand that Paul had great appreciation for the Mosaic Law. He knew that the Law helped to maintain a stable society.

The Law taught about God's holiness and justice. The psalmist wrote, **[Psalm 119:97] O how I love Your law!** - and Paul would have shouted "Amen!" to that. Paul knew that the Law was **[Romans 7:12] holy and righteous and good.**

Knowing all of that, listen to how he describes the Law's role in the lives of the Jews.

[3] So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things⁵ of the world.

By "**the elemental things**" Paul is referring to Moses' Law.

The Jewish people spent fifteen hundred years in spiritual childhood. The Law told them what to do. It tutored them.

⁵ Στοικεια = elemental things; Paul uses the term here to refer to the Mosaic Law. Later (v. 9), in speaking to the Galatian Gentiles, the word refers to pagan practices. "**Elemental things**" are, generally, those things that precede faith in the one, true God.

The Law described how to approach God through the sacrifices. And it dictated their behavior down to some of the most minute details.

It told them how they were to dig latrines and deal with leprosy, what they were to eat, with whom they were to interact, and how they were to settle the land of Canaan (when they got there).

Those fifteen centuries of life under the Law was preparing the Jews to enter spiritual adulthood. They learned their ABC's under Moses, so that they could meet Jesus - the Alpha and Omega. That was the function of the Law.

When Jesus was born late one December night in a Bethlehem stables, God revealed Himself in ways He never had before.

He showed the way to eternal life by faith in His Son and showed us all the way to spiritual adulthood.

Perfect Timing for a Perfect Savior (vv. 4-7)

The Timing of Christ's Coming (v. 4)

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

Notice a few things here.

Jesus, God's Son, was "**born of a woman.**" That is to say that Jesus didn't live in our midst as an exalted alien. No. God the Father sent His Son to be a genuine member of our race.

Jesus was "**born under the Law.**" This highlights His solidarity with our plight. Jesus wasn't exempt from the Law. He was subject to it.

Then, Christ arrived, "**in the fulness of the time.**" That tells us that there was an historical timeliness to Jesus' appearance.

The *pax Romana*, a time of unparalleled peace and world stability that lasted for as long as three hundred years, dominated the Western world.

There were good Roman roads and a common Greek language. Paganism's decline (in light of the bankruptcy of Greek and Roman pantheons) and the sham of a corrupt Jewish leadership left a vacuum that Christianity easily filled.

The historical, social, and even the biblical⁶ ducks were all lined up so that Jesus could do what He came to do. And what did Jesus come to earth to do?

The Purpose of Christ's Coming (v. 5)

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

Jesus came to earth to do something revolutionary and transformational. But it was not to establish a new world order or to reign as king over a physical empire. All of that will come later.⁷

He was born, He lived, and He died to offer Himself as a sacrifice on a Roman cross to buy people like you and me out of slavery so that we could be lawful heirs of God's riches as adopted daughters and sons.

The two terms used in this verse, *redemption* and *adoption*, were concepts with which the Galatians would have been very familiar.

Redeemed...

First, to speak of *redeeming* someone was to use the language of the slave trade.

⁶ Biblically, too, the time was ripe for Jesus' arrival. In a fascinating study, Dr. Harold Hoehner discovered that Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He allowed the crowds to declare Him King, was precisely the day that the prophet Daniel had set for the nation to enter its messianic rest. Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Hoehner, Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, pp. 138-39.

⁷ I have said this on occasion and been challenged with, "But you wouldn't object to increasing righteousness in our nation, would you?" Of course not! And I pray for this and vote for this and am happy to work for this. But, currently, **[1 John 5:19] the whole world lies in the power of the evil one**, and the general trajectory of the world's righteousness is trending down, not up.

In the Roman world, if a man wanted to set a slave free, he would do so by outbidding everybody else at a slave auction. He would offer a "redemption price" to buy the slave out of the slave market.

Christians have been redeemed from the slave market of sin by the price of Christ's death on the cross.

John Newton (author of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*) was an only child whose mother died when he was seven 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.*"⁸

At the age of twenty-three, Newton came to know Christ during a terrible storm at sea. He asked God for mercy, found it, and quit the slave trade.

Then, to be sure that he never forgot the life from which God rescued him, he inscribed Deuteronomy 15:15 in bold letters across his mantelpiece 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 Jesus for eternal life, God purchases you from the slave market of sin. You are no longer subject to the penalty or to the power of sin. You are free to lead a life to the glory of God, a life of abundance and joy and hope in Christ.

Adopted...

Likewise, *adoption* was a very common practice in the Roman Empire, as it is today.

Some of you have firsthand knowledge of what is involved with adoption. Some of you were adopted, or you have adopted a child.

From time to time, I have watched the miracle of adoption. It is always overwhelming to see...

⁸ Those who have read much of American history (or have seen movies like *Amistad*, which depicts the 18th century American slave trade) will understand the depths of depravity to which a slave trader had sunk.

- ...the selfless love of a birth mother to give up her child to another, for the child's benefit.
- ...the longing of the adopting couple for a child, and their passion to bless this child who comes into their home.
- ...the total vulnerability and dependence of the adopted child - of whatever age he or she might be - on the new family.

In Rome, because of the nearly absolute power of a father over his family⁹, 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.

In fact, Roman Emperors would sometimes adopt sons to succeed them on the throne if they thought that their natural-born sons would not make good Emperors. The adopted son could then lawfully become the next ruler of the Roman Empire.

The Galatian readers of this letter knew all about adoption and redemption. But, they would have never dreamed that a slave would be adopted into full sonship.

Sure, a slave might be redeemed to be set free. That was a wonderful redemption. Or, a son of one father might be adopted by a more powerful or wealthier father, and that would be a great adoption.

That's not what happens to Christians.

Before we place our faith in Christ, we are slaves to sin's penalty and power. It doesn't get any worse than that. You can't go any lower than that on the world's totem pole.

And God not only purchased our redemption out of slavery. He adopted us former slaves into His family as full-fledged, adult children.

The Effect of Christ's Coming (vv. 6-7)

Full-fledged, adult children (v. 6a)

[6a] Because you are sons... (and, of course, daughters.)

These Galatians - and all who believe in Jesus - are no longer under any kind of a tutor. We're not underage minors in Christ. We have all the rights, privileges, and freedoms that come with being God's son or His daughter.

The cry of "Abba! Father!" (v. 6b)

[6b]...God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"¹⁰

"**Abba**" is an Aramaic word for "Father". But it is the language of infancy. It's not so much like "Daddy" (a child's term). It's more like "Dada" (baby talk).

But, in Paul's day, children of all ages continued to refer to their father as "**Abba**" / "Dada", especially at moments of great intimacy or at times of great need.

When Jesus called out to God on the night before He died on the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane, He cried out, **[Mark 14:36] "Abba! Father!"** He knew that His "**Abba**" would hear Him.

So, Paul is telling us here that "**Abba**" is not to be outgrown. It is to be grown into.¹¹

The Spirit of God is right now leading you to utter dependence on your heavenly Father and to trust that He is utterly faithful. He is crying out to you to cry out to God as "**Abba**."

If you have or have had a wonderful earthly father, you hear this and get teary-eyed at the thought of an even greater Heavenly Father than you grew up with.

If you had an absent or a weak or even a wicked father, you read these words and get teary-eyed at the thought of finally having a strong Father in whom you can rest.

¹⁰ 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**."

¹¹ Great thoughts from Gordon Fee's wonderful book, Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God, p. 90ff.

⁹ Known as "*patria postestas*".

If you've never known a father, you hear these words and get teary-eyed because the human heart has an Abba-shaped vacuum that can only be perfectly filled by God.

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 always on you, whose heart is always turned toward you, and whose will is always directed toward you for good.

And one more thing.

An heir of God's riches (v. 7)

[7] Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

We can all imagine being heirs. Parents often pass on to their children portions of their estate when they "pass on."

I read this week that Bill and Melinda Gates plan to only pass on a small portion of their \$90 billion net worth to their three kids (although I wonder what "small portion" means...?).

But, you, God's son or daughter, are a direct heir of God's riches.

You have already received the gift of forgiveness. After this life is over you are guaranteed an eternity in glory with God. That's because you are His heir.

You are a child of the King of kings. So were the Galatians to whom Paul was writing.

But any child of this King can choose to live as royalty in the realm of grace or as a slave who has been neither redeemed nor adopted. And some of the Galatians had chosen slavery to rules rather than the freedom of grace.

That "drift" away from grace has been a movement Christians have sadly, often, taken. It's possible that any of us might have drifted, might have reverted, back to slavery.

And just in case that is the case, just remember what life was like before your life in Jesus began.

Spiritual Adulthood (vv. 8-11)

The Way Things Were (v. 8)

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

Paul has already made clear that the Jews who had received the commands of the Mosaic Law had been in slavery to rules and regulations for fifteen centuries.

And non-Jews had also been enslaved. They worshiped images of wood or stone that had no life. Demon inspired nothings.

And idolatry isn't just an ancient world thing.

Broadly, the Bible describes idolatry as the *worship* of anything other than God, the *pursuit of life* in anything but God. And that is a pursuit that is alive and well in 2018.

The worship of God liberates. The worship of anything else - food, drink, power, sex, money - enslaves.

And that was us, then. Now? Well...

The Way Things Are (vv. 9-11)

Known and knowing (v. 9a)

[9a] But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...

Now, through faith in Jesus, you have entered into a know-and-be-known relationship with God. You've been redeemed and adopted.

He knows you inside and out. He knows your hopes and dreams, your nightmares, your failures and secret sins, and your made-in-His-image glory. He knows all of it.

And you are getting to know more and more about Him. You are learning to run to Him, pray to Him, read His Word, be sensitive to His Spirit's leading.

That's the story of everybody who believes in Jesus, in Galatia or in San Antonio. So...

A tragic about face (vv. 9b-10)

[9b]...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 days¹² and months and seasons and years.¹³

They began so well. What happened?

Their passionate, grace-based, joy-filled relationship with Jesus drifted into a cold and formal externalism.

False teachers convinced them 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 following a set of rules.

What happened?

They forgot that life in Jesus is not about earning favor with God. It's about receiving what God offers and living in the light of grace.

They forgot that life in Jesus was not like their former religious life. That was about ritual; Christianity is about a relationship with a loving, heavenly Father.

They forgot that life in Jesus is not even about adopting a lifestyle. It's about being adopted by God and then living as a member of His family.

Those are not trivial forgettings. They are forgettings of such magnitude that Paul has something really strong to say to them, and to us, if we've also forgotten.

All in vain (v. 11)

[11] I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored¹⁴ over you in vain.

Careful. Is Paul saying that people who have fallen for a legalistic rules-based approach to life in Jesus aren't really justified? Is he saying that they aren't redeemed and adopted?

Or, is he saying that if we revert to rules and neglect grace, we are no longer redeemed and adopted?

No!

He says that his own labor will have been in vain if Jesus' followers - then or now - neglect the primacy of grace.

Paul went to Galatia with the dream of seeing Jesus' Gospel of grace transform lives throughout the whole region. He wanted to see multitudes in that land set free to the glory of knowing and being known by God.

That dream would never be fulfilled - it would be a vain dream - if the Galatian Christians reverted to rules-keeping, because there is nothing attractive about a group of legalists.

Jesus followers known for their commitment to rules-following don't transform communities. There were no better rules-followers than the Pharisees, and Jesus reserved His most scathing rebukes for them.

¹⁴ He refers to his work as heavy toil. (*κοπιωω*)

¹² "*Days*" here may be a reference to either Jewish (due to the influence of the Judaistic troublemakers) or pagan (with astrological significance) holidays.

¹³ Paul observed special holidays that were required under the Jewish Law. In Acts 20:16, he was hurrying to get to Jerusalem in time to celebrate Pentecost there. But, he wasn't keeping Pentecost so that he could gain favor with God. Christians are free to observe certain days or not and to eat certain foods or not. These actions, though, will not necessarily move us one step farther to spiritual maturity.

The end goal for a Jesus follower is not a well-ordered life. God wants you to be tuned in to the Spirit's promptings (See John 3), to walk by faith, to be captured by grace.

And the end goal of a church is not to be a well-oiled machine. It is to become a diverse and loving and messy community over which Jesus reigns.

As long as we are...
 ...welcoming people in Jesus' Name who speak English or Spanish or Mandarin or Portugese or Arabic;
 ...opening up our building three times a week to groups of men and women who are trying to overcome crippling addictions;
 ...enjoying the fruits of a growing partnership with Encuentro,
 ...it's going to be messy.

And as long as our youth ministry is seeking to serve lost and broken teens, as long as we try to serve the food insecure with groceries, and as long as we center our life in Jesus and not in politics, economic status, age or gender, we'll live with the tension of promoting holiness and giving grace.

But if, in that messy tension, we seek to love and to serve, there will be a magnetic attraction to the Jesus who makes us one.

We have been placed in a grown-up relationship with God through faith in Jesus, redeemed and adopted.

If we remain childish, **neglecting** God's grace, **forgetting** God's Spirit, **focusing** on works and law rather than faith, the message of Jesus stagnates and the work of Jesus suffers.

It's time to start adulting in Jesus: Live by faith. Live by the Spirit's power. Live in light of grace. Live in love and service.