

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Leaving the Chains Behind

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Ruthless, in Jesus

(Galatians 4:12-31)

Study #7

Introduction: Lost, but making excellent time...

My favorite outdoor humorist, Patrick McManus, writes from real-world experience when he writes about getting lost in the woods.

And he writes from all angles: how to get lost, how to survive when lost, and how to pass the time while lost. Good stuff.

For tips on how to get lost, McManus recommends, (1). take a shortcut; or (2). rely on a friend who claims to have an infallible sense of direction, or (3). don't pay much attention to trail signs.

Once you are lost, McManus recommends panic. Don't fight the panic. Get it out of your system, he says. Then, you can think about getting found.

Before our recent trip to Big Bend National Park (the one where I saw a bear), my brother-in-law, Bob, gave me a book about the Park.

It was a sobering book, titled, Death in Big Bend (by Laurence Parent). Death in Big Bend is a collection of stories about people who have died while hiking or backpacking there, mostly because they got lost.

I think Bob wanted me to pay more attention to trail markers that I sometimes do, because he knows that I've shaken hands with lostness. Frequently, actually.

It's happened while on backpacking trips through southern Colorado or Idaho or Wyoming that I haven't been all that sure of where I was, even as late as three or four days out on the trail.

I'll look at the map and think, *"That mountain ought to be over there."*

It's easy to recognize people who are lost in the woods. If you walk into their campsite, they don't smile much. They're tense around the fire at night. They argue with their friends. They frighten easily.

It's hard to feel free and it's hard to experience joy when you're not sure where you are or where you're going.

So, have I just described your life with God?

I have definitely described the spiritual journey of the people Paul was writing to in Galatia. (Asia Minor, present-day Turkey)

They were busy for God AND they had lost their way. They were active in Christian work - and they were moving away from freedom and into bondage.

That's what legalism does. Legalism is our attempt to establish standing with God on the basis of what we do rather than on what Jesus has done.

The Galatians had lost their bearings and become legalists because they had abandoned the guiding constellations of grace, faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It may happen that, as you are exposed to God's truth today, you realize that you've been traveling on the road of legalism.

If so, you'll discover how to make some mid-course corrections to chart a new course in the direction God wants you to take to freedom, to joy, and to holiness, love, and service.

We start out this morning's look into the Bible by learning about the first meeting of the Galatians and the Apostle Paul.

Fickle Loyalties Breed Confusion (vv. 12-20)

First Meetings, in Galatia (vv. 12-15)

[12] I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. 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."

So, Paul arrived in Galatia suffering from some physical ailment. Not surprisingly, scholars have guessed (and it has never been more than educated guesses) at Paul's physical infirmity.

Their guesses have ranged...
 ...from **malaria**, possibly 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 "loathed" literally means in verse 14.¹

Some have wondered if Paul may have looked repulsive, or even have had some communicable disease. Whatever it was, it's evidently not important that we know - because Paul doesn't tell us.

But the Galatians certainly knew what his physical ailment was. It was this ailment that had prompted him to stop off in at least one of the Galatian cities in which he had preached the Gospel and made disciples.

¹ We can't be sure if the ailment spoken of here is the "*thorn in the flesh*" of 2 Corinthians 12. I think it probably is.

And now, as he writes to them, he reminds them of how helpful and how loving they had been when he had been with them.

He says that they would have been willing to pluck out their own eyes if that would have solved his problem.²

They loved him. And he affirms his love for them.

Paul and Rival "Suitors" (vv. 16-20)

Paul's loving pursuit of the Galatians (vv. 16, 18-19)

[16] So, have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?³... [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 -

Paul is describing himself here as a zealous suitor. He's jealous of their affections. But he's not the kind of suitor who takes advantage. He's told them nothing but the truth.

When he was with them, he had treated them like a father treats his kids - they are his "*children*".

He even puts himself in the mothering role - "*in labor*" - the ultimate sacrificial love.

The point? Paul is trying in every way possible to say, "*I love you!*" to his friends in Galatia in a way that they will understand; in a way that will free them up to accept what he has to say to them.

He points an accusing finger at another group - those whose message the Galatians had embraced. They are legalists.

² I think that this is a pretty big "hint" that his malady was related to eyesight.

³ This rhetorical question has prompted some to suggest that there had been an earlier correspondence to the Galatians that had brought up these issues before and had been rejected.

The troublemakers' shackling pursuit of the Galatians⁴ (v. 17)

[17] They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them.

These troublemakers “courted” the Galatians, but not like Paul did.

Whereas he was out to bless them with the liberating good news of the Gospel, they wanted to reduce the Galatians’ Christian experience to nothing more than a set of rules.

They were binding the Galatians to the constant constraint of feeling the need to ask, *“How well am I doing? Am I measuring up? Am I earning God’s favor? Am I following the right rules, and am I following the rules rightly enough?”*

Growing up, I loved basketball. I played on teams at my schools through 11th grade, when the teams got filled with guys who were blessed with things like height and talent.

But when I was playing on the basketball team at my elementary school, F. P. Caillet, in Dallas, every day at the end of practice, I would ask the coach, *“Am I still on the team?”*

I was terrified of being cut from the team. And playing on a sports team, is, of necessity, a performance-based experience. You can get demoted to second-string or cut.

It’s hard to be filled with joy when you’re battling insecurity about your place on the team. (I later found out that being cut from a sports team is painful, but it isn’t fatal.)

There is not much joy or freedom in that mentality in sports. And transferred to life with God, it is death. Gratitude and worship and joy don’t thrive in a performance-based setting.

So, Paul’s really concerned.

⁴ See 1 Thessalonians. 2:14-16, where Paul deals with troublemakers in another geographic region.

Paul’s genuine concern (v. 20)

[20] but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

This is a parent concerned about the behavior of a child, of any age. This is you, scared to death because your friend is going off the rails and you want to help her.

Your friend knows better, but she’s making self-destructing decisions. You’re baffled about why she’s doing what she’s doing and you’re frantic to move in to stop her.

Paul sees Christian friends in Galatia who know better resorting to working their way to favor with God, forgetting about grace, faith, and the power of the Spirit.

So, not being with them, Paul did what Jesus did when He was with His disciples, making a really important point. He told a story.

Paul’s story is the story of two mothers, and he’s telling it to his friends who seem to want to be under the Law.⁵ We’ll get to the story in just a minute.

Your “Next Step” with Jesus: Choose Your Mother (vv. 21-31)⁶

Our Unavoidable Choice (vv. 21-28)

Those who want to be under law (v. 21)

[21] Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?

Paul is writing to a group of people who WANT to live on the basis of conformity to an external code. Can you imagine anyone WANTING to be under Law’s thumb?

⁵ The verses to come presuppose a good bit of knowledge of Old Testament history as Paul mentions Isaac, Ishmael, Hagar, Sarah, Jerusalem, and Mt. Sinai.

⁶ 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.

Sure!

I understand. It is easier that way. It is not as joyful, as free or as powerful. But, it is way easier to approach life from a rules-based orientation. Rules tell us what we are to do in each and every situation.

It is a lot harder to accept that life's assignment is to love well, serve with sensitivity, and respond to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. But that IS the Christian's assignment.

Remember the parable Jesus told about the prodigal son? It is as touching a story as we find anywhere in the Gospels.

When the Prodigal returned to his father, he got it right when he said, *"I am not worthy to be treated as your son."*

His father still treated him like a son, but he knew that by his behavior he had forfeited the right to expect that treatment.

The Galatians, though, were saying, *"God, we don't WANT to be treated as Your children."*

The Galatians were the prodigal son. Just like we are the prodigal son or daughter. We have been welcomed home with a ring, a banquet, sandals on our feet, and a royal robe. So, why would they - or who would we - ever walked out of the house to go back to the pigpen?

It's a terrible move, but that is what we Christians sometimes do. We abandon the path of grace and travel the road of rules. That's why Paul now turns to story.

He tells us about Abraham's two wives (yes - this is NOT the best part of Abraham's story...). First, he mentions Hagar, Sarah's maid.

A tale of two mothers (vv. 21-23)

[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...

The son of the bondwoman (Hagar)

Ten long years after God had promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, Abraham got impatient with God's slowness.

He took Sarah's Egyptian maid, Hagar, who bore him a son. Abraham named this son *"Ishmael"* (*"God hears"*).

You can read this story in Genesis 16. The second part of the story is found in Genesis 21.

The son of the freewoman (Sarah)

[23] But the son by the...free woman [was born] through the promise.

Fifteen years later, when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety, they welcomed into the nursery they had prepared twenty-five years earlier the son God had promised.

Abraham and Sarah named their son *"Isaac"* (which means *"laughter"*). It's easy to imagine how much laughter must have filled their tent after all those disappointing years.

So. Ishmael was born in the regular way, according to nature, but against the will of God; Isaac was born out of nature's general standard operating procedure, in the will of God.

A good Bible story - but thus far Paul really hasn't proved much. Well, keep listening as Paul creates an allegory out of the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah.

The 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 Old Covenant as it was thundered from on high.⁷

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 true wife of Abraham.

The children of freedom (vv. 26-28)

[26] But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. [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 lots and lots of descendants. Sarah stands for prolific childbearing, fulfilled dreams, and joy. Sarah stands for freedom.

In Paul's allegory, just as Hagar stands for legalism, Sarah stands for the life in Christ we were redeemed to live.

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.

The first purpose of this allegory is to get us to recognize that we who believe in Jesus are to call Sarah "mom" and not Hagar.

It is not enough to claim Abraham as our father. We must also claim Sarah as our mother.

⁷ Paul is not denying the literal sense of Genesis. It is the literal meaning that makes the allegory make sense.

The second purpose is to show what happens to the freedom-loving, joy-filled sons and daughters of Sarah.

Our Inevitable Conflict (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 original story, Genesis records interaction between the son of Sarah (Isaac) and the son of Hagar (Ishmael). This interaction previews an inevitable conflict in the life of the Christian and often in the life of the church.

When Isaac was weaned, Abraham threw a party so that everyone could celebrate that the son of the promise was growing up.

Everybody was celebrating *except* Isaac's older half-brother, Ishmael. Ishmael was off to the side, mocking Isaac.

Paul calls that mockery, "*persecution*,"⁸ and says that Christians who live according to Promise, who embrace freedom, who live like the free sons and daughters of Sarah they are, can expect trouble. And that trouble can come in a variety of ways.

In Galatia, the new Christians began walking in freedom, and along come the legalistic troublemakers from Jerusalem with a leash.

Today, if you decide to live like the true child of Sarah you are, to listen to God's "*I promise*" and to "*walk according to the Spirit*" - expect opposition.

Some people who hold to certain convictions that you don't hold to may hold you in contempt.

For instance, you may or may not know this, but there isn't one verse in the Bible that tells us to celebrate Christmas or Easter. There are no verses that tell us not to, either.

⁸ Paul considers legalistic treatment persecution, as did Jesus. Note His comments about the Pharisees, especially in Matthew 23.

We would not be sinning if some year we - as individuals or as a church - decided that we were going to live every day aware of Jesus' incarnation and every day aware of Jesus' resurrection - and hold no special services observing Christmas or Easter.

Now, if we decided to do this, might some people fault us? Sure - but they'd be wrong to do so. Because we are free before God to observe or to not observe special days (See Galatians 4:10)⁹

When you choose to trust a Person rather than order your life by a set of arbitrary, extra-biblical rules, you may be opposed. But you're also taking a giant next step toward spiritual maturity.

That's choosing grace over works, faith over law. Or, using the story Paul's been telling, it's like choosing Sarah over Hagar.

Our Message to Legalism. "Take a Hike!" (vv. 30-31)

As we read the story in Genesis, we see Isaac's mom, Sarah, marching up to Abraham and demanding that he deal with the abuse her son got at the party.

***[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, I have read those words and been a bit uncomfortable with Sarah's treatment of Hagar and her son, Ishmael.

Evidently, Abraham had trouble with his wife's request, too, because Genesis tells us that ***[21:11] the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son.***

I bet it did! For seventeen years Ishmael had grown up as the only child in Abraham's home.

He was Abraham's son. Abraham loved Ishmael, even though he knew that Isaac, not Ishmael was ***"the son of the promise."***¹⁰

While Abraham was in mental turmoil as to how he should deal with the situation, God told him to do whatever his wife told him to do (generally good advice).

Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael packing, right out into the desert, because the son born of the flesh (Ishmael) could not live under the same roof as the son of the promise (Isaac).

In Galatians, Paul tells this part of the Isaac / Ishmael story for a reason.

It is to drive home the idea that freedom and legalism cannot co-exist. And it is now clear how we are to deal with legalism. As ruthlessly as Sarah did in sending Hagar away.

Paul says, ***"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."***

We are to root out the vestiges of legalism wherever we see them because, ***[31]... we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.***

⁹ Call it "self-persecution", but you may even experience an inner inclination back toward law, because the human heart is drawn to rules. Our natural, human "pull" is to look for a code to live by rather than a Person to trust.

¹⁰ In Genesis 17:18, when Abraham heard God's promise that he and Sarah would have a child for the umpteenth time, he cried out, ***"Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"***

Conclusion:

This - fighting tooth and nail against legalism - is one of the two reasons I have wanted to walk through Galatians with you.

First, of course, I have wanted us all to see the beauty of the simple Gospel of Jesus: faith alone in Christ alone saves forevermore.

Clarify about the beautiful, simple Gospel of Jesus...

The Gospel calls people who are far from God - that's everyone, by the way - to find forgiveness by trusting in what Jesus did for them when He died on a Roman cross and then rose again on the third day.

Salvation, justification, is not by works. It's all of grace.

When you put your faith in the Jesus who died and rose again, eternal life is yours.

This beautiful, simple Gospel has got to be clear in our minds and in our presentations.

But, having been saved by grace through faith, the question arises, "What next? Where do I go from here? What 'next steps' do I take?"

Clarity about legalism and the proper motivators for life in Jesus...

In a word, what follows our justification before God is a life, here and now, consisting of holiness, love and service.

So, do you find it surprising that we are now two-thirds of the way through Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, and there has not been one single exhortation to a holy life or one reference to the importance of service and love?

Paul has spent the entire time to this point defending the simple Gospel of grace and fighting our natural tendency to drift toward legalism.

Much of the remaining two chapters *will* focus on the importance of living out the faith in some very practical ways. Paul's got a lot to say about lifestyle between here and the end of the letter.

But he's been all about grace, all about faith, and all about the power of the Holy Spirit, as if getting that right is foundational to getting lifestyle straight.

Bingo.

A life of "next steps" with Jesus is all about *holiness, love, and service*. But these are to be fueled by GRACE, FAITH, and the POWER of the HOLY SPIRIT.

When the motivators behind the pursuit of holiness, love and service are grace, faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we live the "abundant life" Jesus promised (see John 10:10).

That life is marked by JOY. And we know that because that's exactly what Paul says here in Galatians 4.

When we're living like Sarah's children, we hear, **[4:27]** **"Rejoice!...Break forth and shout!"**

It's the exact opposite when we're living as if our mother is Hagar. Hagar leads her children into slavery, chains, prison, have-to, ought-to, you-better and you-better-not.

So. Avoid legalism. Choose freedom. Right. Got it.

But have you ever noticed that the external behavior of a legalistic child of Hagar can be virtually identical to that of a son or a daughter of Sarah?

Both can teach Sunday School, deliver meals to hurting families, pack groceries for the Food Pantry, read their Bibles, give sacrificially, attend an ABF or Care Group, be on the Praise Team, preach sermons...

And the impact of one person doing these things is death; the impact of the other is life.

The behavior of the two isn't much different. But the impact is dramatically different because the energy behind the behavior is different.

A "legalism" / freedom diagnostic...

So, let me offer up a diagnostic to help you know when you are living in freedom as Sarah's son or daughter and when you have fallen for legalism, like Hagar's kids always do.

When obedience to God feels like drudgery, when time in prayer and in God's word feel like a chore, when the pursuit of holiness seems like a burden, it's a sure sign that you've lost your bearings.

When showing God's love to your spouse or to your friend or to your neighbor brings resentment and when serving in Jesus' Name is distasteful, you've fallen into Hagar-ism/legalism.

If your life's dashboard indicates you are low on JOY, it's time to send Hagar packing out into the desert and go back to Sarah, your true mom.

In other words, to repent of legalism means that you:
remember God's amazing grace and love;
renew your commitment to trust Him; and
return to a moment-by-moment sensitivity to the Spirit.