

## **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)

### **Free!...Now What?**

(Galatians 5:1-15)

Study #8

#### **Introduction: Spiritual Recidivism...**

Here on the eve of our nations' mid-term elections, we pause to reflect on how precious it is to be free to vote for the candidate of our choice, to voice an opinion in the public square, and to worship according to the dictates of our conscience.

These freedoms - and others, like the freedom to go where you want to go and to pursue your dreams - are freedoms many societies deny even today, and yet they are birthrights you and I cherish.

Freedom is such a valuable thing that people have given their lives to win it for their loved ones. Many risk everything to gain it.

In our nations, over two million men and women are housed in prisons and jails because they have violated the laws of the land. There are well over two hundred thousand inmates in Texas, alone.

Of course, in jail, many of the freedoms you and I enjoy go away. A prisoner can't go where she wants to go. An inmate can't fully pursue his dreams. Prisoners may remain behind bars for years, longing for freedoms that we on the outside take for granted.

But, then, the day comes when the prisoner has paid his debt to society. The prison term comes to an end and he is released to pursue his dreams. He is free.

Why is it, then, that 43% of those who are released from prison commit crimes and return to prison within three years?

We call that boomerang of prison to freedom to prison *recidivism*.

It would make sense that, having lost the priceless gift of freedom, a former inmate would make the most of a return to freedom and would do everything in his power to never lose that freedom again.

Yes, we long for freedom. But, the high rate of recidivism points to an equal and insidious pull in the human heart away from freedom.

I want to be careful here to not treat a very complex issue simplistically. There are many, many reasons for recidivism.

But lots of people who study this matter believe that a large part of recidivism - at least for some - is explained by the fact that freedom can be tough to manage.

Prison, for all its brutality and restriction, is at least straightforward.

Freedom offers a dizzying world of choices. In jail you are told what to do, where to go, and when to go there. There is no ambiguity. You follow the rules, or else. Period. End of story.

Well, as it is in the world of orange jumpsuits and prison guards, so it is in the realm of the spirit.

The Gospel message sets people free. Because of sin, we were locked up in spiritual jail. But Jesus opened the cell door and released us into a world of grace, faith, and life in the Spirit.

Paul wrote the letter we're been exploring to the new Christians living in Asia Minor (Galatia) because they were banging on the doors of their former jail cells, wanting to get back in.

It turns out that there is such a thing as *spiritual recidivism*.

Today, we'll listen as Paul urges people like us to turn away from the prison of legalism and enter the life of freedom Jesus died and rose again to give us.

As we look at our Bible passage for the morning, we will be skipping around in the passage a bit.

The first verse, though, is the only place to begin. Paul cuts to the chase and offers a radical "take" on the defining purpose for Christ's death and resurrection.

### **Freedom, Central to Life in Jesus (v. 1)**<sup>1</sup>

***[1] It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.***

Your freedom was central to what Jesus had in mind as He went to the cross. That we live free is that important to God.

When you place your faith in Jesus, you are instantly set free **from** the guilt of your sin, **from** the prospect of an eternity in Hell, and **from** the condemning judgment of God.

You are also set free to **enter** a life of freedom that is filled with grace and truth and that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But, as Paul says here, there is a part you have to play in this drama. You are to **"keep standing firm"** in freedom. You must stand firm because there are people who prefer jail to liberty, and who want you to be subject to a **"yoke of slavery."**

Picture a Texas scene of a century ago. Imagine a team of oxen, yoked together out in the middle of a field on a hot, dry, dusty, South Texas day, pulling a plow to the crack of a whip.

When you picture that scene, do you think **"JOY!"**? Probably not. A **"yoke of slavery"** conjures up images of monotonous drudgery.

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<sup>1</sup> Demonstrating that Galatians is uniquely written to emphasize *freedom* in Jesus, note the uses of the word in the rest of the New Testament vs. Galatians: Gal. - 11x; Rom - 7x; 2 Cor. - 8x; rest of Paul - 2x; rest of the N.T. - 13x.

But, the life to which God calls us is a life of freedom and joy.<sup>2</sup>

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

That is what GRACE is all about.

Before, we couldn't measure up. Now that we know Jesus, what is changed is NOT that we do measure up. It's that we now "get" that measuring up was never the point.

We have been made God's sons and daughters through faith in Jesus, not by acing some spiritual SAT test. God accepts us in Jesus. It is our birthright to live as the free people we are.

But, here's the thing. We might not embrace that birthright. We might submit to legalism.

A son or a daughter of God might submit to a yoke of slavery. Pulling no punches, Paul tells us, *"What then...?"* in what follows.

### **Freedom, or the Way of Bondage (vv. 2-12)**

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

*Disastrous results for choosing legalism (vv. 2-4)*

No benefit from Jesus (v. 2)

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

Paul is imagining some guy in Galatia who has trusted in Jesus for eternal life deciding to receive circumcision as a way to get closer to God, or to make himself more godly.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A "yoke" is the dominating reality in a person's life. To not know Christ is to be under the yoke of sin, the Law, guilt, and the judgment of God.

We can expand that to any first-century Christian who decided to observe Jewish festivals, keep the Old Testament dietary code, or do anything to approach God by rituals and rules.

He says that Christ will not benefit that man. So, does he mean to say that this man is no longer saved?

Or, to put it in 2018 terms, is someone who believes in Jesus AND thinks that their behavior makes them acceptable or not to God, lovable or not to God, no longer saved?

No! Paul isn't even addressing the issue of being right with God or not here. He is speaking to people who know Jesus.

His point is that someone who knows Christ and is depending on "good works" to move them toward maturity, is actually moving away from maturity. That's because if they are depending on **their** works, they can't be focused on **His** work.

To the degree that our Christianity is works and rules-based, as opposed to grace, faith, and Spirit-based, then to that extent we have chosen a yoke of slavery and have taken Jesus out of the picture.

And there is more.

You can't be "a little bit" legalistic (v. 3)

***[3] And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.<sup>4</sup>***

For Paul's audience, the point was that the Mosaic Law isn't a pick-and-choose cafeteria line.

Once the "camel" gets its nose under the tent, it's soon all in the tent. and when Christians of Paul's day started following Moses' Law, they would eventually become obligated to keep the whole thing.

For us, today, the point is that once we start on the road of thinking that our good works make us right with God, righter with God, more secure in God, that thinking begins to take over.

Once we start on the road to legalism, it isn't likely that we'll stay just a little bit legalistic.

Legalism consumes. It devours. We'll become stricter and narrower and more rigid and less flexible and less compassionate.

Better to stomp it out as soon as we are aware of it and embrace the way of grace, faith, and Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

And how do we know if we are on the legalism treadmill?

Try this on for size: If you're measuring your spirituality by what you do, if you're determining how well you're doing by what you're doing, you're on the path of legalistic crazy-making.

Spiritual disciplines and wholesome habits are wonderful. But the path to the freedom God wants for you is marked by an all-consuming preoccupation with what Jesus has done.

And then, in the most severe language Paul uses in the book (maybe in all his writings), he tells us that Christians who travel the road of legalism have taken a jump off a cliff.

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.***

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<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament rite of male circumcision was given as a sign of the covenant (Genesis 17), after Abraham was justified. It was expressly made a part of Israel's corporate life in Leviticus 12. But, circumcision was never tied to justification before God, until it was mistakenly done so before (by Pharisees and others) and during the early New Testament era.

<sup>4</sup> See James 2:10 and Romans 2:25 for the same thought.

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<sup>5</sup> To pursue Christian growth by means of obedience to the Law would have required the Galatians to make sacrifices in a certain way, dig their latrines in a certain way, go to Jerusalem for festivals three times a year, reap the corners of their fields at harvest times - and carry out some 600 other commandments.

Remember what Paul is hammering home. He is highlighting the benefit Christ offers us when we embrace grace, faith, and the way of the Spirit here and now.<sup>6</sup>

He has urged us to ***“keep standing firm”*** in freedom. When we aren’t standing firm in freedom, we stumble and *“fall from grace.”*

That doesn’t mean that sons and daughters of God are un-adopted, un-justified, and un-redeemed.

It does mean that if we abandon the way of the Spirit, we cut ourselves off from the energizing power of Christ.

The good news is that it’s possible for you and me - for us! - to avoid the terrible outcomes Paul warns about.

Christ will be of the greatest benefit to us if we put our confidence in what He has done for us rather than in what we do for Him. Look to the cross. Always. Every day.

We can live free from the legalism if we nurture a sensitivity to the Spirit’s leading. Pray that God will open your eyes to the work of the Spirit as you walk through your day.

We can stay vitally connected to Jesus if we stand firm in grace. If you have fallen from grace, rise. Repent and rise in dependence on what He has done for you.

There is hope in a walk with Jesus marked by grace, faith, and the power of the Spirit. There is no hope in a *“Look at what I’ve done”* kind of Christianity.

There are people, today, who would gladly open the prison door and lead you back into bondage. Some visitors from Jerusalem had done that to the Galatians, and Paul aims his next words at anyone who would lead us away from freedom.

*Disastrous results for leading others into legalism (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. [10a] I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view...***

Wherever they go, legalists have an influence disproportionate to their numbers. They are like leaven, yeast in a lump of dough.<sup>7</sup>

They infiltrate, they permeate, they saturate - until every hint of grace and beauty and life and joy are gone. It’s all replaced by a dry, stale, sterile conformity to a code that attracts no one to Jesus.

Legalists are like weeds. Give a weed an inch, and it’ll take your yard. Give a legalist an inch in your life, and he will take over your life.

If legalism gains a foothold in a church, it will destroy its beauty and vitality. Legalists will pile on rules so thick that freedom is nothing but a hazy memory.

So, what does a legalistic church look like, where the leaven of bondage is winning the day?

I’ve given it some thought this week and I imagine that the mood, the feel of a church dominated by legalism will be one of two extremes.

There might be arrogance and pride because good things are getting done - *“Look at us, aren’t we doing great!”* Or, there could be a defeatist air of stagnation because of repeated failures to “measure up”.

<sup>6</sup> To validate that Paul considered his readers to be justified before God, see Galatians 1:6, 9; 2:2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 26; 4:7, 9.

<sup>7</sup> In Scripture, leaven is typically (although not always) symbolic of sin. Leaven was removed from Jewish homes before Passover as a sign of purification, 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. It is used in a good sense in parables found in Matthew 13 and Luke 13.

People in a legalistic church are subjected to guilt motivation.<sup>8</sup> The focus is on what they have done.

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

On the other hand, the church that is living in freedom is focused on the wonderful work Jesus accomplished on the cross. They are excited about what the living Christ is doing today. Now.

The church living in freedom is made up of people who are aware of their sin - and they are overwhelmed with gratitude to God for the cross of Christ.

They obey God because of grace received. And, they are moved to serve because of His promises of reward for faithfulness.

They falter, sure - and they repent of their failures. But, out of their brokenness and repentance comes God's strength.

They challenge each other to hard obedience and they accept where each one is on his or her own journey of faith.

And, because their focus in life is on Jesus' work, not their works, they are *filled* with life AND *give* life to a watching community. Color this church with the diversity and beauty of a rainbow.

In the Gospels, Jesus' strongest statements were reserved for the legalist, so Paul lets fly with a little fire here.

What he has to say here is to anyone who would dare lead a person or a church into the trap of legalism.

Judgment for 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 mutilate<sup>9</sup> themselves.<sup>10</sup>***

Yes, that's graphic - and it is meant figuratively, I am sure. But the sense is clear. Paul doesn't want these legalists reproducing!

So, we've seen legalism for the ugly thing it is, and legalists for the heaven they are. We have rejected them.

Now, having been released from jail into spiritual freedom, we want to avoid spiritual recidivism. No more jail for us! So, what do we do now that we are free? Ready? Here goes.

### **The Beauty of 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.***

On Friday, the church office copier ran out of the kind of toner we need to make color programs. Some of you are holding full-color programs and some have black-and-white programs. For what Paul's talking about here, that doesn't matter.

Some of you have beautiful voices and you'll bless the rest of us at Thanksgiving and Christmas with your songs. The rest of us don't. We make joyful "noises" to the Lord. That's OK.

You may have been raised in a tough home without Jesus and lived hard and fast before starting to take a few next steps with Jesus. Or, you may have been raised in a loving home where Jesus reigned. Either is OK if you're ready to take a next step with Him today.

There are varying levels of education among us. You may have a PhD or a GED. For what I'm about to say, it doesn't matter.

<sup>8</sup> The time-tested method involving: *need* + *availability* + *guilt* (NAG, for short).

<sup>9</sup> The word "mutilate" means castrate.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

This is what matters to God - that we trust Him, and that our trust in Him works itself out in love for Him and others.<sup>11</sup>

Growing in Christ is all about submitting to a very good God and trusting that He knows what He is doing even when nothing about our lives seems to make sense. In other words: faith.

Growing in Christ is all about love. Any idea about what maturity looks like that doesn't zero in on love is wrong.<sup>12</sup> The one undeniable and irresistible mark of progress in a walk with God is love.

Knowledge is not the essence of spiritual maturity. Neither is social poise, or leadership acumen, or theological sophistication. It's sacrificial, lay-down-your-life, forgive-your-enemies love.

Mature people "get" what matters to Jesus. Trusting God and loving others is what we were made for. It's what we were freed for.

Taking that message out of the theoretical and putting it into shoe leather is how Paul ends.

### **Freedom FROM and Freedom TO (vv. 13-15)**

#### **What Christian Freedom is NOT! (v. 13a)**

***[13a] For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh***<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> Jesus summed up His teachings on the night before He died by giving one New Commandment: that we love one another on the example He Himself gave us.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, the Bible uses the term "flesh" to refer to humanity's lower nature - Romans 6:19; 7:5; 8:1-9; 1 John 2:16; Gal. 3:4; 4:14; 1:16. Baker's Dictionary of Theology says, "*flesh' is the dynamic principle of sinfulness.*" In some cases, this is accurate. As it is used here, though, "flesh" refers to the whole person, just as we might say "flesh and blood" today as a way of referring to a person, or as God did in Noah's day when He said, "*The end of all flesh is at hand.*" (Genesis 6:13), meaning that the end of humanity was at hand.

Paul knows the human heart well enough to offer this warning. You're free. But don't use your freedom selfishly. Don't use your freedom to live sinfully.

It's a good warning. But, have you noticed?

This is the only finger-wagging there is. It's the only warning he gives in the whole letter to be careful to not misuse the freedom we have in Jesus.

That tells me that Paul was not all that worried that if we who have been saved by God's amazing grace get the message that Jesus has freed us from law, we'll think, "*Great! Now I can sin like the devil!*"

Paul wasn't afraid of grace.

Galatians tells me that Paul was mostly concerned for something else and that the greatest danger for Christians lies elsewhere.

The biggest threat to vibrant, biblical Christianity is that we would do all the right stuff for all the wrong reasons, would therefore not experience the joy of life in Christ, and would therefore lead lives with no power to entice others toward Jesus.

But, he says it. So, we'll say it, too.

We haven't been granted freedom in Jesus so that we can lead more self-centered lives.<sup>14</sup> Spiritual liberation has not come so that we can take better advantage of opportunities for advancement.

To live that way would be to live as opportunistically as the river that follows the path of least resistance on its way downhill.

That isn't our calling. We've been freed from the clutches of sin for something way better.

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<sup>14</sup> For the same thought, see ***[1 Peter 2:16] Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.***

## The Ultimate Freedom - Loving Servanthood! (vv. 13b-14)

***[13b] but through love serve one another. [14] For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."***<sup>15</sup>

One of the inviolable laws of life is that everybody serves something.

We can serve any of the idols of 2018 - the stuff we own, our toys and treasures, our personal pleasures. Or, we can serve others.

But all that we have in Jesus has been given so that we would lovingly serve.

That kind of an others-centered life focus is what brings glory to God and shows us to be Jesus' followers. It's a beautiful way to live.

But, of course, we might NOT live this way. So, here's that ugly possibility, illustrated.

## Christian Cannibalism (v. 15)

***[15] But if you bite and devour one another<sup>16</sup>, take care that you are not consumed by one another.***

Like the two snakes that bit each other on the tail and swallowed each other whole, the church that doesn't foster freedom and that doesn't major on loving service will consume itself.

Now, what is the first thing that you would do if you wanted to encourage biting and devouring, here in our church?

I've got some suggestions of things any of us could do to actively contribute to Christian cannibalism.

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<sup>15</sup> See these verses for the same thought: Romans 13:8-10; 1 John 4:7-8; John 13:34-35. "The whole Law" looks at the totality of the Law's intent, and not at the fulfillment of the Law in its constituent parts.

<sup>16</sup> In ancient writings this phrase, "***biting and devouring***", pictured fights between wild dogs.

We could speak discouraging words and be spiteful and petty. We could creatively sow disharmony by gossip. We could neglect praying for the church, giving to the church, serving in the church.

And these are all active, effective means to bite and devour.

But there are effective passive means, too. Apathy and inaction, withdrawal and sideline-sitting work just as well.

There are all kinds of ways to do life in Christ's church wrong. Paul tells us that there's one way to do it right: "***Through love serve one another.***"

So, what I'm going to do now, after our time of considering grace, faith, and life in the Spirit, is urge you to give, pray, and serve using guilt, heavy-handed manipulation, and arm-twisting.

Or..., how about if, here at the end, we just imagine life together in Jesus, just like He designed it.

## Conclusion:

Remember. Because you put your faith in Jesus, you're a redeemed and justified son or daughter of God. The Spirit of God dwells in you.

You are now no longer a slave to sin. The prison doors have opened wide, ushering you into a life of freedom. Now there's no going back. No spiritual recidivism for you.

You have gifts to give that will greatly encourage your friends - wherever they may be in their faith journey - to take their next steps with Jesus.

And, since Jesus knows that we don't do all that well alone, He invites you and me to live out our faith in community. Together.

I'm taking next steps with Jesus as I study, learn, and pray with and for people in a Care Group that meets on Tuesday evening.

I'm struggling with some challenges I'm facing these days and I wouldn't be doing as well as I am without that group.

There are other Care Groups here. Talk with Pastor Jeff about joining one of them.

There are Adult Bible Fellowships that meet while the worship services are going on, at 9:30 or 11:00. You'll find rich community there.

You'll find community and ways to connect by joining a ministry team. You could serve with our English as a Second Language ministry, on the Praise Team or the Missions Committee. You could serve youth or children.

You could connect by simply keeping your eyes open to needs that your bounty could meet.

You were re-created in Jesus to be free **FROM** the bondage of rules and "ought-to's" and free **TO** *"through love serve one another."*

There is nothing more spiritually intriguing than when your friends get a glimpse of you, a follower of Jesus, confidently trusting in your very good God and compassionately loving those around you.