

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)

Keeping the Main Things the Main Thing Study #11

(Galatians 6:11-18)

Introduction: *Begin - and end! - with your best foot forward...*

Today, we are wrapping up our study of what most people who study these things believe is the Apostle Paul's earliest writing.

We call this letter, written to a group of young Christians who lived in what is now the country of Turkey, "Galatians." And he finishes Galatians the way he began, with a focus on Christianity's essentials.

The letter started off with a bang. It was high energy right out of the chute. No tentativeness. Paul loved the people to whom he was writing and told them the truth. No holds barred.

Within the first paragraph or two, we know he is promoting grace and faith, freedom in Jesus, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the simple Gospel, the good news that says eternal life comes through faith alone in Christ alone. Essential stuff.

Paul's writing pace is very much unlike my own running style when I used to run a lot, which was to start slow and then taper off at the end.

Paul started Galatians with intensity and ended with intensity. He started with his best foot forward and he ends with his best foot forward.

Here, at the start of the conclusion, he mentions the first of several *essentials* we'll see today - living out the FREEDOM we have in Christ - with a final push against legalism and those who promote it.

The Centrality of Freedom (vv. 11-13)

Legalists are Cowards! (vv. 11-12)

[11] See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.¹ [12] Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

The life we were saved to live in Jesus is a liberated, dynamic, unpredictable journey into holiness, love, and risk-taking faith.

The opposite of that life is to live legalistically. Legalism kills freedom by summing up life in Christ with a list of rules.

And the legalists who had polluted the faith of the new Christians in Galatia were turning Christianity into a "Law of Moses + Jesus" religion.

They taught that Christians needed to add the Jewish Law's requirements to our "To Do" list to get right with God and to stay right with God.

Paul says (v. 12) that the only benefit of that kind of teaching was that it kept the legalists in good standing with the most violent opponents of the faith at that time, the strictest, most legalistic Jews.

Paul himself was constantly in hot water with the Jews for saying that non-Jewish Christians didn't have to keep the Old Testament Law. He even said that JEWISH Christians no longer had to keep the Law.

¹ Here, Paul claims authorship of Galatians. He likely dictated the bulk of this letter to a secretary but has written these closing thoughts in his own hand, for a personal touch. The reference to the size of the letters could point us to his having written with large letters due either to his poor eyesight (cf. 4:12-15), or to his desire to emphasize the content of his closing thoughts.

It was Paul's teaching about this freedom from the Mosaic Law that led to so much of his suffering. And he did suffer.

Right before he ends the letter (v. 17), Paul comments on wounds on his body which he bore because he was so clear on the Gospel message.²

He taught that faith alone in Christ alone justifies a person before God, without respect to Law, rules and rituals, or even effort.

But the legalists were willing to do anything to avoid suffering, including switching out the only message that can save sinners from God's righteous judgment with another one that added works. And they switched just to stay safe.

Legalists are cowards. They are also hypocrites and braggarts.

Legalists are Hypocritical Braggarts! (v. 13)

[13] For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves but they desire to have you circumcised, so that they may boast in your flesh.

They urged other Christians to keep the Law and all its requirements, but they didn't keep the Law, themselves. They didn't practice what they preached.

Legalists want a safe, comfortable, rules-based religion that keeps them clean, respectable, and safe. It's a nice life, but it sort of flies in the face of following a crucified Jesus.

This morning, you and I compare the life of Paul and the lives of the legalists and we are drawn to the way of Paul because it's so filled with integrity.

² ***[17] From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.*** Some think Paul bore the five wounds of the cross (the *stigmata*). I think, rather, that he is referring to wounds inflicted by others, not supernaturally by God. The Greek word, "stigmata," referred to a brand on an animal or slave that proved ownership. Paul's stigmata was proof of his fidelity to the Gospel. Some of Paul's sufferings are recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

He lived the truth. He watered nothing down. He was willing to suffer for what he believed.

And, like Paul, we want to keep the main thing, the main thing.

Among other things, that means standing firm in the freedom we have in Jesus. It mean being willing to suffer for the simple Gospel, and learning to hate legalism.

That's *essential*.

Another *essential* immediately follows. The cross of Jesus is an essential element of our faith. So, here we are, twenty-three days and counting from Christmas, focusing on Good Friday.

The Centrality of the Cross (v. 14)

The Cross is the Object of Our Boasting

[14] But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Crucifixion...

Crucifixion is among the most ghastly forms of torture and capital punishment ever devised. Back in Roman times, people with manners simply didn't mention crucifixion. It was a taboo topic.

So, Paul's words would have been jarring to a first century reader. But, from his day to this, Christians have always boasted about the cross of Jesus.

When we obsess about something, we boast about it.

Boasting, for good or ill...

Some boasting is personal and not very winsome. Like when politicians boast about bills they have passed or when people brag about how good they are at this or that.

Boasting about the accomplishments of someone else, though, is another thing. I think it's great to boast about somebody else.

We in San Antonio have been in a twenty-year habit of boasting about the Spurs - and we may do so again. (You gotta believe...)

And I love to hear parents boast about their kid's latest exploits. First steps and words, potty training, victories in the classroom or in athletics are worth a celebration, even a boast.

Boasting about God...

The Old Testament Jews may have bragged about lots of things. But the bragging they did that we know best was their boasting about God's exploits. And when they bragged about God, they would usually zero in on the Exodus.

Over and over again, we find that when the Jews reflected on God's great acts, the first thing they mentioned was the deliverance of Israel from Egypt by the parted Red Sea. What a great and awesome God they served!

Today, when we Christians boast about God's great exploits, we don't focus on the Exodus, but on the cross of Jesus. Jesus' cross is the greatest moment in human history.

Nothing comes close to the story of the cross, or to the end of the story of the cross, the empty tomb.

And the message of the cross has been the theme of the letter to the Galatians from the start.

The Cross is the Foundation of Our Salvation (Galatians 1)

[1:3] Grace to you and peace 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...

Notice some of the elements that are essential to the message of the cross in these words.

Jesus' volunteered to be a sacrifice

Jesus' death was wholly voluntary. His life wasn't taken from Him against His will. He "***gave Himself.***" Of His own free will He came to earth, on assignment from His Father, to die.

He came to die as a sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus died for our sins

The Bible teaches that the penalty for sin is death. In the first book of the Bible - Genesis - God told the first man, Adam, that if he ever ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die.

So, when Adam ate from that tree, he died. He began the steady decline toward physical death, but he instantly died, spiritually. That special part of him that related to God died.

Paul means all of that when he says in Romans ***[6:23] the wages of sin is death.*** It all began with Adam.

From its earliest days, humanity was in a terrible mess and it was Jesus who came to die as a sinless sacrifice.

In order for us to live before God, somehow or other, somebody or other, needed to deal with our sin problem. Jesus dealt with our sins by the cross.

He suffered the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the horror of death to rescue people like us.

Jesus' death rescued us!

Most of us don't like to see ourselves as the ones in need of rescue. We're the rescuers, not the rescu-ees.

In my daydreams, I am not the struggling swimmer going down for the third time. I'm the lifeguard who saves someone else.

But the Bible says that because we have sinned, we're all the ones going down for the third time.

We're spiritually hopeless and we can't help ourselves. We won't be safe until Someone strong enough to pull us out of the deep waters comes along.

That's what Jesus did for us on the cross.

If you've heard of a group called The Navigators, you may also have heard the name, Dawson Trottman, the Navigators' founder. "Daws", as he was known, was an energetic, zealous man who loved the Lord and loved to tell people about Jesus.

He had boundless energy, was an excellent athlete who also happened to be a strong swimmer. Daws was greatly respected in his generation as a Christian leader.

In 1956, Daws was at a Navigator retreat held near Schroon Lake in New York. One afternoon, he and some others went out for a boat ride. The waters got choppy and Daws and a young girl fell off the boat.

Daws held the girl up while the boat came around to pick them up. But when the girl was lifted into the boat, Daws sank. He gave his life to save that girl.

Jesus was that self-sacrificing swimmer who saved us by giving up His own life. He died so that we could live forever with Him.³

Now, anyone who places faith in the Jesus who died and rose again is lifted into the boat - forgiven, saved, justified, redeemed and reconciled to God.

We are the people who have been brought near to God and near to each other by the cross, in which, like Paul, we boast.

³ The Gospels of Matthew and Mark both record King Jesus walking forward to meet those who were arresting Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing full well that to do so was to invite the horrible death of the cross. Mark tells us that Jesus answered the High Priest's question about who He was in such a way that He could not have avoided crucifixion. Caiaphas asked Jesus if He was the Son of God, and He replied, "***I AM; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.***" (Mark 14:62)

The cross of Christ is central to our faith. Arising out of *that* central thing is *another* central thing.

The Centrality of a New Creation (v. 15)

[15] For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

What doesn't matter is adherence to a code. Rituals aren't central. Rules-keeping is not what it's all about.

So, what does matter? **BEING A NEW CREATION**, that's what!

In the first century, the issue might have been whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols or not.

To that thorny first-century issue, Paul famously said, "*You eat meat sacrificed to idols? Sweet. You don't eat meat sacrificed to idols - that's nice, too.*" (see Romans 14:1-6)

Today, it's,
"You have a spotless reputation in the community as a person of integrity? Wonderful!" Or
"You give a lot to charity? Well done." Or
"You attend church activities several times during a given week? Great."

Let me ask you the most important question: *Are you a new creation in Jesus Christ?*

You and I have invested lots of time looking into Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. Eleven Sundays if you've been here for all of them. And even if this is the only message from Galatians you've heard, you've still invested your time today.

If you now understand the basic flow of Galatians, I am glad.

If you have grasped the idea that GRACE is superior to Law, that FAITH beats works every time, and that serving others is better than serving self, that is wonderful.

Maybe you have learned some biblical history from the stories and the characters Paul has referred to throughout this letter: Sarah and Abraham and Isaac and Ishmael and Hagar. If so, great.

But wouldn't it be awful if you've gleaned all that information and haven't become a new creation in Christ?

What a tragedy it would be to have gained great perspective on historical facts but have never placed your trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross to bring you forgiveness and to give you purpose and meaning in life.⁴

There is no more pressing issue in life than the one Paul's words here prompt us to ask: Are you a new creation in Christ Jesus? Have you trusted Jesus to save your eternal soul?

Today can be the watershed moment of your life if you have never looked at that beautiful cross to see a Savior who died for you.

If you are trusting what Christ did on that cross to take away the guilt of your sin, you are a new creation - and **that** is what matters!

The central thing in **human history** is the cross of Christ.

The central thing in **your history** is becoming a new creation by trusting what Jesus accomplished on that cross.

And the central thing in **our current story** is that we live as the redeemed people we are.

The Centrality of a Walk in Central Things (v. 16)

[16] And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.⁵

⁴ Some of the most helpful writings I have in my study are articles and books by people who deny every tenet of the Christian faith. Great knowledge doesn't guarantee that you will come to know Christ by faith.

⁵ What does Paul mean by, "*the Israel of God.*" I believe that he is referring to the righteous remnant who trusted in Jesus from among the Jewish people. This comment balances the letter and shows us Paul's heart for his countrymen as he combated the anti-Semitism of the day.

Our new *status* before God is that we are His daughters and sons. Our new *reality* is that the Spirit of God resides within us. And our new *hope* is that we who are new creations are equipped to soar into next steps with Jesus.

ESSENTIALLY, we soar into freedom.

Soaring into Freedom (5:1)

[5:1] It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

I've already mentioned freedom this morning. Here's a reprise.

Paul wanted to set his first-century readers free from the "**yoke of slavery**" that is legalism. But legalism is alive and kicking in 2018.

We can fall into a legalistic approach to life by it having it imposed from the outside. Or, just as easily, we can put ourselves under a legalistic system by trying to measure up or fit in, feeling guilty or proud depending on whether we are successful or not.

But God didn't save us to make us proud of ourselves or to load us down with guilt. He wants us to rest in His love and acceptance. He wants us to be filled with joy for all that we have in Jesus - and we have so much.

We thank God for the freedom we have in Christ. Freedom from condemnation. Freedom to pursue the joy of holiness. Freedom to live in moment-by-moment dependence on the Spirit.

We soar into freedom and we also, ESSENTIALLY, soar into love and service.

Soaring into Love and Service (5:13-15)

[5:13] For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, 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.'

The life that you were redeemed to live is the life of Jesus and the life of Jesus was a life given to love and to service.

You want to be loved - and that's not a problem. You were hard-wired by God to run on love.

And as much as you want to be loved, everyone you know is fatally flawed (just like you are) and is incapable of loving you the way you hunger to be loved.

There is only One who can love you perfectly - and He *does* love you perfectly.

No. Today, you can't get a warm hug from God and you can't sit down with Him for a face-to-face, engaged, two-way conversation yet.

That's all coming later.

But God - God! - loves you so much that He sent "***His only begotten Son***" for you. He's reserved a place at His banquet table for you and has prepared a place for you to stay with Him forever.

You are no longer in a love deficit. Your love tank literally is overflowing.

So, you now are fully equipped to carry out what Jesus called "*The New Commandment*" - love one another. You can carry out what He said was right after the Greatest Commandment in importance. ("***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength***") You can now give others a taste of the perfect love on which you have feasted.

You were created to be loved and you were saved to love. Your assignment is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Imagine getting to the end of your life and hearing your spouse tell you, "*Thank you for loving me.*" Or to hear from your friends, "*You let me know what it feels like to be truly loved.*"

When you *trusted* Jesus you entered a world of love. Now that you are have trusted and are *in* Jesus, you get to enrich that world by loving others the way He has loved you.

You get to love even those who, no, *especially* those who have never tasted God's perfect love.

This last essential I'll list may seem intimidating. It is a bit daunting. But, it's exciting and is what we are all saved to do. We **ESSENTIALLY** soar into a life of cross-centered witness for Jesus.

Soaring into Cross-Centered Witness (3:1; 6:14)

Back in Galatians, chapter 3, Paul reminded his readers of how he had preached to them when he came their way on the First Missionary Journey.

[3:1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

In other words, when Paul came to Galatia, he made it his aim to present Christ crucified so vividly that it would be as if his audience was actually watching the crucifixion take place before their very eyes.

He succeeded, turning the ears of his hearers into eyes.

That's what you want to do when you're telling any story - turn people's ears into eyes so that they can SEE what you are talking about.

That is true when you are describing a wreck to a police officer or making up a bedtime story for your kids. It is especially the case when you're telling your friend the best story of all.

When you're telling the story of Jesus, you want to tell the story so colorfully that they can see Him:
walking through the land of Israel with His disciples;
multiplying fish and loaves for thousands to eat;
calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee;
cleansing lepers and giving sight to the blind and raising the dead.

You want to tell the whole story, the story of Jesus' last hours - of Jesus dying for them on the cross! - so compellingly that as they hear your words, they can see it in their mind's eye.

That's what bringing your friends to Jesus is all about. It's that simple. You don't need to have answers to all the hard questions.

It's OK if you can't explain every hard saying of Jesus (and there are some). It's not necessary that you be able to seamlessly synch every Bible verse with every scientific theory.

You just need to know and to be able to tell two stories.

His story is the most important. The facts are simple and straightforward. Jesus lived a perfect life. He died a perfectly awful death to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose from the dead to guarantee that He was who He said He was.

Sure, the more details you can add about His life, His miracles, and His teaching, the better. The more you can tell about His love for the one who is lost, the better. But to tell your friend that Jesus lived, died, and rose again is enough.

And then there is your story.

Again, nothing fancy required.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see* works just fine.

Tell more if you want about your unique brokenness, about your desperation for what only God could provide, and about the moment when you turned to Jesus and gave Him the treasure of your trust.

But to soar into a life of cross-centered witness, to **[16] walk by this rule** and to live as that new creation in Christ you are is to tell your friends His story and your story.

Conclusion:

Growth in Jesus is what we're all about here. And we usually describe that growth by the image of taking next steps with Him.

We picture the road to maturity as a climb to greater and greater heights of spirituality and maturity, day by day, year by year.

That's a great picture, but there are other images that may help.

Growth in Jesus may also be imagined as a more and more sharply focused centering on the essentials.

This image affirms that the main thing in life is to keep the main thing the main thing, Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us to aim for the bulls-eyes of freedom, love and service, and cross-centered witness.

And we will be sure to always boast about what Jesus did for us on the cross!