

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

A Church Fueled by God's Promise

(Galatians 3:15-29)

Study #5

Introduction: Powered by...

Elite athletes have to eat a lot to properly feed their bodies for the grueling workouts they endure to be at the top of their game.

For instance, back when Michael Phelps ruled the world of swimming and was winning Olympic gold, left and right, the Phelps Diet was the topic of a lot of talk.

Michael Phelps ate a lot. Most days, he consumed about twelve thousand calories. A normal breakfast was a three-egg sandwich, some chocolate chip pancakes, a five-egg omelet, French toast, and grits.

But Phelps also ate clean. World-class athletes take pains to eat and drink only what will best fuel their performance.

If those twelve thousand calories had consisted of junk food and empty calories, lots of fast food and processed food, he would never have become a champion swimmer.

We who aren't elite athletes don't compete on a world stage for gold medals. But we would still do well to eat clean. Eat healthy.

Junk food doesn't provide the fuel we need for peak performance for the game of life. Healthy food is the best fuel for bodies and minds.

As we turn our attention back to Galatians, we listen as the Apostle Paul continues calling the churches of Galatia - and us - to nurture a culture of grace.

His thrust today is to place before us a choice of healthy or junk "fuels," only one of which will produce an abundant, impactful, dynamic life with Jesus.

To begin, Paul turns our thoughts to covenants.

Foundational Covenant Promises (vv. 15-16)

The Way of Covenants (3:15)

[15] Brothers and sisters, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it.

By "**covenant**," Paul has in mind contracts, treaties, and other similar agreements.

If you've dealt with the deaths of loved ones (as I have), and if you have prepared in advance for your own inevitable demise, you are familiar with one form of covenant: Last Wills and Testaments.

It has long been an accepted practice that we give instructions, before we die, about what to do with our assets when we die.

In the ancient Roman world, wills were drawn up pretty much as they are, today.

A person will write down in a will how they want their assets distributed after their death. And that will can be changed at any time he or she wants to change it. But no changes are allowed after the will-writer dies.

Once they die, the instructions expressed in a will can't be changed. They are inviolable.¹ Otherwise, there would be chaos.

¹ See Heb. 9:15-17 for the same thought.

If changes could be made after the deceased's death, when the family gathered for the reading of the will, the door would be open for anyone to make demands to change the will for their own benefit.

So, no changes to the will AFTER the will-maker's death. We are bound by law to carry out the wishes of the deceased that they expressed while still living.

Paul makes this point about human wills (or "covenants") to make a point about God's covenant agreement with Abraham.

God's Covenant with Abraham (3:16; Genesis 15)

From God to Abraham to Christ (v. 16)

[16] Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "and to seeds," as one would in referring to many, but rather as in referring to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.

At issue are the covenant promises that God repeatedly made to Abraham that he would receive a land and that he would have a son.

The words we read here come straight from Genesis 22. This was when God spoke to Abraham after Abraham had taken Isaac up on Mount Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice.²

Here in Galatians, Paul makes a major point of saying "**seed**" (singular) and not "**seeds**" (plural) to make it clear that the ultimate fulfillment of the promise was not to the nation of Israel.

From the very beginning, the covenant was meant to be fulfilled in Jesus, the "**Seed**."

All the promises made to Abraham were true for Abraham. He was a blessing. He and Sarah did have a son. His descendants did possess the land of Canaan.

² Abraham didn't have to follow through on this sacrifice because of God's own gracious provision of a ram caught in the bushes, which Abraham did sacrifice.

But those promises were eventually fulfilled in a way that Abraham could have never guessed. Namely, that 4,000 years later...

- Jesus would bring blessing to all the nations of the earth.
- Jesus would bring countless spiritual descendants to God.
- Jesus would be the final Possessor of the Promised Land.

So, the Lord Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises made to Abraham. And, as Paul will make clear today, those covenant promises flow through Jesus to us, who believe.

Now, let's look at the scene where God entered into that covenant with Abraham.

The inauguration of the "covenant" with Abraham (Genesis 15)

The actual making of the covenant is recorded immediately after Abraham was justified by faith, back in the first part of Genesis 15.

As we saw last Sunday, God justified Abraham on the basis of his faith in God's promise. God told him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven - and Abraham believed that.

Then, God commanded Abraham to bring appropriate sacrifices (a calf, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon) for a covenant-making ceremony.

Abraham was to prepare for this ceremony as it was normally done around 2,000 BC in the Near East.³

He cut animals - a calf, a goat, a ram, a dove, a pigeon - in two and laid the halves opposite each other, leaving a walk-way in between.

According to custom, the two men entering into a covenant would walk between the carcasses of the sacrificed animals, signifying a blood oath to keep their promises to each other.

In this case, though, there was a HUGE change. As the covenant ceremony began, God put Abraham into a stupor.

³ The form of this covenant ceremony is well-attested from records of the near eastern culture of Abraham's time.

So, at the point when the two - God and Abraham - were to have walked through the animal halves together, Abraham was unable to move.

And God, taking the form of a smoking oven, passed between the animal halves alone.

In other words, God unilaterally promised that He would keep the promises he was making to Abraham regardless of what Abraham did or did not do.

Abraham and God didn't make a covenant together. God made a covenant with Abraham. Or, as Paul says, God gave "*promises*" (or an "*inheritance*," v. 18) to Abraham.⁴

PROMISE is and always has been God's Standard Operating Procedure. It was in Abraham's day, when He promised blessing, a land, and a son. It is today, too.

Today, among other things, God Promises eternal life to the one who believes in Jesus.

That is Paul, on the theme of Promise. Now he addresses another topic: law.

Specifically, he is speaking about the Mosaic Law, and he first mentions the timing of God's gift of the Law.

All About Law (versus Promise) (vv. 17, 19, 21-22, 23-24)

The Timing of God's Law (vv. 17-18)

[17] What I am saying is this: the Law, which came 430 years later,⁵ does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by

⁴ The covenant God made with Abraham is referred to as a promise, since it was a different arrangement than a normal covenant, being unilateral, but carried out in a typical covenant-making format.

⁵ What Paul appears to be saying (but which doesn't seem to exactly fit with the chronology of Genesis) is that from the giving of the covenant to Abraham (Gen.

God, so as to nullify the promise. [18] For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

As Paul has already said (Galatians 3:1-14), the Law was given to God's people centuries after Abraham lived and died, while the nation was wandering in the wilderness.

The way of Law was NOT given to supersede the way of Promise. It was given alongside of Promise, given for a completely different purpose than Promise.

The Rationale for the Law (vv. 19-20)

[19] Why the Law then? It was added on account of the violations, having been ordered through angels at the hand of a mediator, until the Seed would come to whom the promise had been made. [20] Now a mediator is not for one party only; but God is only one.⁶

The Law is not contrary to Promise. Law and Promise are just designed to do different things.

It is not as if Law was saying, "*Here is one way to be saved.*" and Promise was saying, "*Here is another way to be saved.*" Rather, they each have their roles.

The Law of Moses fulfilled critical roles in God's program. It added stability to Jewish society and communicated God's holiness as it brought sin to light.⁷

15) until the giving of the Law of Moses (Ex. 20) was 430 years. A reading of Genesis would indicate that it was longer than that. John Stott notes that 430 years was the actual duration of the bondage in Egypt (Ex. 12:41) and assumes that Paul meant to reference the main chronological event between Abraham and Moses - the Egyptian captivity. This is my own position.

⁶ This verse is notoriously difficult to interpret. Three hundred different ways of looking at it have been catalogued. The point is that a mediator acts on behalf of both parties in a covenant dispute. God was the only One involved in the covenant with Abraham. So, there is no need for a mediator between God and us.

⁷ The Law of Moses was inferior to the Promise because, (1). it was *mediated*. The Law was given by God to angels to Moses to the people. Not so the Promise. God

Law was given to rule the Jews' lives during their stay in the land of Promise.

But the Mosaic Covenant was different from the Abrahamic "promise covenant." With Abraham, God made unilateral promises of what He would do, regardless of what Abraham did.

But the Law of Moses was explicitly a bilateral covenant. God required that the people keep their end of the deal - that is, obey the Law! - if they were going to be blessed in the land.

It was a system by which God promised great blessings to Israel IF AND ONLY IF she obeyed His Law. When she obeyed, she was blessed; when she was disobedient, she was disciplined.

But there was one thing Law was never intended to do, and one purpose it could never fulfill. It could not give life.

Life only comes from God through Promise. Law brings only condemnation.

The Condemning Function of the Law (vv. 21-22)

[21] Is the Law, then, contrary to the promises of God? Far from it! For if a law had been given that was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. [22] But the Scripture has confined everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Think of Law and Promise as two phases of a legal proceeding, where a defendant is being tried for a crime.

The purpose of the first phase of that trial is to determine the defendant's guilt or innocence. If the defendant is found guilty, the trial moves to the second phase, the punishment phase.

dealt directly with Abraham when He made the promise. Plus, (2). the Law was temporary. (2 Corinthians 3)

With God, the two phases are represented by Law and Promise. With respect to the first phase, there is never a hung jury. Law always finds a person guilty. Every time. We have all sinned.

BUT, when someone believes in Jesus, the punishment phase takes a twist.

In that person's case, God thunders, "*Guilty, by reason of sin. Punishment has already been PAID IN FULL by My Son.*"

And with that, the Judge stands up, throws off His robes, and says, "*Welcome to the family, My son! Welcome home, My daughter!*"

LAW determines whether guilty or not; **PROMISE** determines if condemned or not. And there is no condemnation for those who, having believed God's Promise, are in Christ Jesus.

But the Law condemns. Paul tells us that the Law had another function, too.

The Redemptive Function of the Law (vv. 23-24)

The Jews, in custody under the Law (v. 23)

[23] But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the Law, being confined for the faith that was destined to be revealed.

Paul is saying here that before Jesus came, the Jews ("*we*") were kept separated from the other nations of the world.

And the purpose of that "**confinement**" was so that the Messiah would come from them and be, truly, the Son (descendant) of the Jewish King, David.

But then Paul tells us what the Law was to have done during the time before Jesus and what it can continue to do for both Jews and non-Jews now.

The Law, a guardian to let us all to Christ (v. 24)

[24] Therefore the Law has become our guardian⁸ to lead us to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith.

Here, he describes a minor child's place in Roman society. The child was under the care of a **guardian** (Greek - *παιδαγωγος*).

This guardian played a major role in a minor child's life. The guardian was both schoolteacher and disciplinarian.

The guardian taught manners, tested the child on material he was studying, disciplined him, shadowed him, scolded him, and directed the most minute activities of his days to ensure that he grew into a responsible adult.

The guardian served a valuable role in the life of the child. But the guardian didn't give life. He was the watchdog that regulated life.

Before the child reached maturity, he had no legal rights and no privileges.

But then, at the appropriate age, the guardian - with his rules and scoldings and lessons - was set aside, and the child was welcomed into the adult world.

Paul brings up the guardian here in Galatians to tell us that the Law (either the Mosaic Law for Jews or general law for non-Jews) functioned as a "guardian" before Jesus came.

Every time someone got out of line, the Law said, "Gotcha!"

- Tell a lie and the Law righteously said, "You are a liar."
- Steal something that isn't yours and the Law screamed, "You're a thief."

The function of the Law-as-guardian was to convince people of their sin and lead them to see that they needed a Savior.

And now, Jesus has come. He has lived, died, and risen again. He has suffered for and borne the penalty for our sins and now offers us eternal life by believing in His Name.

⁸ Other words from this word group in Greek include "**discipline**" (*παιδεία*) - Heb. 12:5,7,8,11, and "**scourge**" (*παιδεύο*) - Luke 23:16.

And we have said, "Yes!" We have believed, which means that we have received all that He has promised.

A bunch of things are now true about us that were not true when we were under a guardian. Here, Paul lists four of them.

Freedom Through Ancient Promises (vv. 25-29)

#1: Freedom From a Guardian (v. 25)

[25] But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

In Christ, we are full-fledged adults before God. We no longer need the guardian of the Law telling us what to do and what not to do.

The Apostle Paul had lots of respect and appreciation for the Law of Moses. But he says here that we are not under, not subject to, not obliged to obey the rules and commandments of the Mosaic Law.⁹

The author of the book of Hebrews, writing to believing Jews, said that the Mosaic Law was "**obsolete.**" (Hebrews 8:13)

Jesus also thought highly of the Law.

And He repeatedly said in the Sermon on the Mount, "**You have heard 'x' in the Law, but I say....,**" calling His followers to something more radical, more powerful, more compelling than the Law did.¹⁰

We are no longer under a Law that says, "*Thou shalt...*" and "*Thou shalt not...*"

Now that we belong to Jesus, we live on the basis of His, "*I Promise...*," written not on tablets of stone, but on our hearts.¹¹

⁹ In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul described the Old Covenant (another term for the Mosaic Law) as "**the ministry of death**" (v. 7), "**the ministry of condemnation**" (v. 9), and a ministry of fading glory (v. 11)

¹⁰ See Matthew 5:21-22, 5:27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44.

¹¹ This is the meaning of Jeremiah when he speaks of a New Covenant, where God's Law is written, not on tablets of stone, but on our hearts.

Another thing that has changed for us relates to family.

#2: The Freedom of Son- and Daughter-ship (v. 26)

[26] For you are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus Christ.¹²

To be called God's child speaks of relationship. It speaks of loving authority. Among many other things, God-as-Father means that we are always welcomed into His presence.

Pastor Tony Evans once told the story of being on the phone with George W. Bush while Bush was governor of Texas.

In the middle of this conversation, Tony's admin signaled to him that one of his children was on the phone. Tony told Governor Bush that he would have to put him on hold for a minute, because family was calling.

That is the priority of a father for his children. That is the value God places on His relationship with you, His child.

He is always listening. Always accessible. Always available. Always attentive. Never too busy to be bothered by His child. Then, there is this.

#3: The Freedom of "New Clothes" (v. 27)

[27] For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.¹³

¹² "Sons" is used in the original Greek, not to highlight men over women (see v. 28), but because in Roman society, it was the son who was given the legal right of inheritance, which is Paul's emphasis here. My version of the Bible, the 2020 New American Standard Bible, includes "*and daughters*" to assure modern readers that all who are in Jesus are in God's family.

¹³ Elsewhere, we are told to put on: the armor of light (Rom. 13:12), the new man (Eph. 4:24), the armor of God (Eph. 6:11), compassion (Col. 3:12).

Baptism was a universally understood experience in the early church. It is likely that every believer in the Galatian churches had either been baptized or knew what baptism was all about.

And there are two kinds of baptism mentioned in the New Testament, and there are different opinions about which is in Paul's mind here.¹⁴

In baptism by the Holy Spirit, the believer is immersed into the Body of Christ, at the point of being born again.

In water baptism, the believer is immersed into a lake or a river or a pool, symbolizing both death to life AND a commitment to a new path in life.

Either may be in view here. But what is important is that baptism - of either kind - is an experience in which the actions of the believer are completely unimportant. Christians are passive in the process of baptism.

The reason I think Paul is talking about water baptism is that in the early church, baptisms frequently involved disrobing, and then reclothing afterwards.

I'm sure this was done in a way to ensure modesty, but the symbolism would not have been lost on anyone. They were taking off the old and putting on the new.

Paul says that every Christian, having stripped for baptism, has now, post-baptism, begun to clothe himself with Christ.

According to Jesus, to be baptized is to take a big step into Jesus-following discipleship. Having been baptized, we have already taken one step of clothing ourselves with Christ. We are to continue taking steps in that direction.

Finally, it is true because of Jesus' Promise that there is fundamental unity and essential equality in Jesus.¹⁵

¹⁴ Scholars are divided as to whether Paul is referring to water or Spirit baptism.

¹⁵ Paul's threefold affirmation corresponds to a Jewish formula, as expressed in the morning prayer in which the male Jew thanks God that he is not a Gentile, a slave

4 - The Freedom of Unity and Equality in Jesus (v. 28)

There is neither Jew nor Greek

[28] There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This was THE issue in the first century church. Jesus broke down the barriers separating these two segments of humanity. He didn't do away with Jewishness and Gentile-ness. He affirmed their equality and unity.

Jesus has broken down all ethnic and racial barriers, so that we are one body in Christ, while retaining our own distinctives.

There is neither slave nor free

[28] There is neither slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul recognized social differences in many of his letters, giving instructions to both slave and free.

I am sure that there were, in the first century church, people of widely differing stations in life - just as there are in our own church.

We differ in employment status, financial status, and a host of other social variables.

We might be tempted to think ourselves overly important or unimportant. Paul says that we all stand equal before God in Christ.

*There is neither male nor female*¹⁶

or a woman. The reason for this thanksgiving was not a disparagement of Gentiles, slaves or women as persons, but was due to the fact that they were disqualified from some privileges which were open to free Jewish males.

¹⁶ While there have certainly been abuses, the Christian faith has historically elevated women's status in society.

[28] There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And, by this statement, Paul was not doing away with all gender-based role distinctions in the church or home.

Paul wrote some things about the role of men and some things about the role of women. He would not say that there is no functional difference between men and women.

But he IS saying that in Christ there is an essential equality between men and women.

While in particular contexts, men and women fill differing roles, the males and females in this church are equal in the sight of God and are deserving of equal respect and esteem.

Paul has painted a beautiful picture of what being related to God by means of Promise means.

- One, we are no longer under the Law.
- Two, we are deeply cherished sons and daughters of God.
- Three, we have been baptized into Jesus and are getting clothed with Jesus.
- Fourth, we are all of equal value in the sight of God.

Or, as he summarizes...

Conclusion: Living by "Thou Shalt" or "I Promise" (v. 29)

[29] And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

Everything Paul has written seeds and Seed, about unilateral and bilateral covenants, about Moses and Abraham, and about Law and Promise wraps up with this: We, in Christ, are spiritual descendants of Abraham, related to God through Promise.

Great. But why did he write all of this?

Remember. Paul wrote this letter because the Galatians had fallen into the trap of legalism. We're spending time in Galatians because it is still tempting to fall for legalism.

And one way to understand legalism is to say that it is listening more to God's dealings with Moses than to His dealings with Abraham.

Through Moses, to motivate His people, God said, *"Thou shalt! Thou shalt not! - or else!"*

To Abraham, to motivate His people, God said, *"I promise."*

Paul gave this stark contrast between Law and Promise to highlight the choice that faces a believer - like you or me - and that faces a church - like ours: Will we who are descendants of Abraham live on the basis of *"Thou shalt!"* or on the basis of God's *"I promise!"*?

Let's say that God has given you a tough assignment. He has assigned you to love someone who has not been kind to you. Got someone in mind? Great.

If you are listening to *"Thou shalt!"* - or, borrowing from the opening illustration about world-class athletes eating good, clean food, eating the food of Law - you may think, *"God says that I am to act lovingly toward this person. So, I will obey God's rules."*

Fueled by the "food" of Law, you may help that hard-to-love person. You might avoid harming him. You might act kindly toward her.¹⁷

But, while the junk food of Law may produce some good action, it isn't likely to produce heartfelt, go the extra mile, sacrificial love for the hard-to-love person.

On the other hand, you might avail yourself of the high-protein food of Promise.

Faced with your hard assignment, you remember that you are no longer under Law, that you are a daughter or a son of God, that you are united with every other son or daughter of God, and that you have been baptized into Christ.

Fueled by God's Promise may lead to very similar actions. But the source will be different, the motivation will be different, and the effect of the actions will be powerful and very different.

The same thing is true for us, together. In carrying out our ministry and mission, we could rely on Law or on Promise.

If we here at Northwest rely on Law, we'll use heavy doses of *"Thou shalt!"* and *"Thou shalt not!"* when inviting each other to serve. The junk food of Law may prompt service, but it won't be eager service. It'll be grudging service.

But if we agree, as a church, to feast on God's Promise - on grace already received, on the great privilege it is to serve Jesus, on the hope of rewards and an abundant life, and on the expectation of hearing, *"Well done!"* from our Savior - the service and ministries that go on here will be carried out with grace and power and joy!

We'll respond to shortages as invitations to trust, to challenges as opportunities to see God provide, and to hardships as ways to show how much we love Him who has loved us so well.

¹⁷ I am not downplaying the importance of obedience, but such a mindset can easily become a grudging martyr complex that doesn't glorify God, doesn't extend grace, and doesn't exactly entice others to want what we have.