

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Ruthless, for Jesus

(Galatians 4:12-31)

Study #7

Introduction: The never lost art of getting lost...

Back in 2018, before I took a backpacking trip to Big Bend National Park with my camping buddy and brother-in-law, Bob, he gave me a book to read about the Park.

It wasn't exactly light reading. The book was 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 gave this book to me before our trip because he wanted me to pay more attention to trail markers than I sometimes do. He knew that I've frequently shaken hands with lostness.

It has 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.

After studying the topographic map, I'll 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. 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.

By describing people who are lost out on the trail, I have just described people who aren't all that sure where they are or where they're going, spiritually.

This was exactly the condition of the Christians Paul was writing to when he penned his letter to the churches of Galatia.

They were actively serving Jesus AND they were moving away from freedom and into bondage.

That's what happens when a Christian or when a church moves away from the centrality of grace, faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what happens when legalism reigns.

If joy in serving Jesus and freedom in living for Jesus is not your current reality, it may be that you've gotten lost in the weeds of legalism. If so, the passage in front of us is just what you need.

Getting lost in the woods is no fun. I know. Been there. Done that. Getting lost in the weeds of legalism is worse. Paul guides us out of those weeds and into the freedom of grace today.

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

Love Lends Credibility (vv. 12-20)

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

[12] I beg of you, brothers and sisters, 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 you did not despise that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition, nor express contempt, 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 testify about you that, if possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

So, Paul arrived in Galatia suffering from some unidentified physical ailment. Not surprisingly, Bible scholars have made lots of guesses as to what it was.

Their guesses have ranged...
 ...from **malaria**, which he could have contracted in his journeys through the lowlands of Southern Galatia.
 ...to an **eye problem**, which may have dated 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 people with epilepsy to ward off the disease from oneself, and that is what **“express contempt”** literally means (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 evidently this ailment that had prompted him to stop off in one of the Galatian cities where he preached the Gospel and made disciples.

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, *“You guys were willing to tear out your own eyes if that would have solved the 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 way, and not only when I am present with you. [19]

¹ We can’t be sure if the ailment spoken of here is the **“thorn in the flesh”** of 2 Corinthians 12. I suspect that it is.

² This is a big “hint” that his malady was related to eyesight.

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

My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you -

This is Paul, simply saying to the people in the churches of Galatia, *“I love you.”*

One way to look at this is to say that he’s describing himself as a jealous suitor. But he wasn’t looking to take advantage of them. His whole purpose was to bring them great blessing.

When he was with them, he told them the truth and treated them like a good father treats his kids. He even puts himself in the mothering role. He is **“in labor”** with them.

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

The troublemakers’ shackling pursuit of the Galatians (v. 17)

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

These guys courted the Galatians, but not like Paul did.

His goal was to bless them and to liberate them. The legalists wanted to reduce life in Jesus to nothing more than a set of rules.

They wanted the Galatians to constantly ask, *“How well am I doing? Am I measuring up? Am I following the right rules? Am I following the right rules rightly enough?”*

Those questions are joy-killers because they arise from insecurity. To view this from a sports perspective, it’s tough to be filled with joy when you’re battling insecurity about your place on the team.

Transferred to life with God, it is even worse. Gratitude and worship and joy don’t thrive in a performance-based setting.

So, Paul’s really concerned.

Paul’s genuine concern (v. 20)

[20] but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone of voice, for I am at a loss about you.

This is a parent concerned about the behavior of a child, and a child of any age.

This is you, scared because your friend is going off the rails and you want to help him. He knows better, but he's making self-destructing decisions. You're baffled about why your friend is doing what he's doing and you're frantic to stop him.

Paul knows that his Christian friends in Galatia know better than to view life with Jesus through a "*Thou shalt!*" lens. They know about grace, faith, and the power of the Spirit.

He wants to help, but he's not with them.

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

Paul is going to tell a story about two mothers. This story will be perfect for his friends who seem to want to be under the Law.⁴

Your "Next Step" with Jesus? Choose Your Mother (vv. 21-31)⁵

An 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. How nutty is that? Can you imagine anyone WANTING to be under Law's thumb?

Sure.

I understand. In some ways, it is easier to live on the basis of a set of rules. It is not as joyful, as free or as powerful. But rules do 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 joyfully, and respond to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. But that, in brief, 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 the younger son 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 walk out of the house to go back to the pigpen?

It's a terrible move, but that may be what we are sometimes tempted to do. We leave the path of grace and travel the road of rules.

So, Paul now turns to story to turn us back to grace. He tells us about two women who bore sons to Abraham (And no, this is NOT the most glorious part of Abraham's story...).

First, he mentions Hagar, Sarah's maid, Hagar.

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

[22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and one by the free woman. [23a] But the son by the slave woman 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 timing.

The father of the faithful acted faithlessly. He took Sarah's Egyptian maid, Hagar, who bore him a son. Abraham named this son "Ishmael" ("God hears").⁶

Then, Paul reminds us of another son.

The son of the freewoman (Sarah)

[23b]...and the son by the free woman through the promise.

Fifteen years after the birth of Ishmael, when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety, they welcomed into their home the son that God had promised twenty-five years earlier.

Abraham and Sarah named their son "Isaac" (which means "laughter"). And, yes, we can imagine that there was a lot of laughter in the 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, and in the will of God.

It's a good Bible story. But to this point, Paul hasn't proved anything. Keep listening.

Paul now creates an allegory out of the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah.

The children of slavery (vv. 24-25)

[24] This is speaking allegorically, for these women are⁷ two covenants: one coming from Mount Sinai giving birth to 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 enslaved with her children.

In Paul's allegory, Hagar stands for Mt. Sinai - the place where God gave the Law. Mt. Sinai is where the people received the Old Covenant as it was delivered to them from Moses.⁸

Hagar stands for Law. Hagar, 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, INFERTILE ONE WHO DOES NOT GIVE BIRTH; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE ARE MORE NUMEROUS THAN THOSE OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND." [28] And you brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Sarah, who had been barren for so long, ended 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.

⁷ They "stand for" the two covenants.

⁸ Paul is not denying the literal sense of Genesis. It is the literal meaning that makes the allegory make sense.

⁶ Find this story in Genesis 16. The second part of the story is found in Genesis 21.

We who have placed our faith in Jesus are children of Abraham and Sarah, just like Isaac. We are children of 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 sons and daughters of Sarah. Not Hagar.

We who have been redeemed and adopted have Abraham as our spiritual father AND we have Sarah as our spiritual mother.

Prior to today you would have claimed to be a child of Abraham through faith in Jesus. Now, claim Sarah as your mom. Walk in freedom as Sarah's kid.

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

An All-Too-Common Conflict (v. 29)

[29] But as at that time the son who was born according to the flesh persecuted the one who was born according to the Spirit, so it is even now.

Going back to the story of Isaac and Ishmael in Genesis, we learn of an interaction between the son of Sarah and the son of Hagar. This interaction previews an all-too-common conflict for the Christian and for a 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*."⁹ He 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.

That trouble can come in a variety of ways.

⁹ Paul considers legalistic treatment persecution, as did Jesus. Note His comments about the Pharisees, especially in Matthew 23.

In Galatia, when the new Christians began walking in freedom, along came 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*" - you may be opposed.

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

As one example of the kind of thing I'm talking about, consider the observance or not of special days.

You may or may not know this, but there isn't one verse in the Bible that tells us to celebrate Christmas or Easter. On the other hand, there is nothing in the Bible that tells us not to.

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 for Christmas or Easter.

If we were to decide to do this, some people might fault us. But they would be wrong to fault us because we are free before God to observe or to not observe special days. (See Galatians 4:10; Romans 14:5-9)¹⁰

(To point out that this is a legitimate illustration, I listened this past week to a podcast put out by a highly respected Christian who said that it was obligatory for all Christians to keep the Sabbath. Nope. In fact, the commandment to keep the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament.)

And there are other arenas in which this opposition to freedom may raise its head.

¹⁰ 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.

Think about matters like what we eat, what we drink, what we drive, the kind of house we live in, where we go to school, where we get our news, our politics - the list is long.

But bringing in baggage from Old Testament Law or tradition or culture and making it into an imperative for all Christians does at least two damaging things in a church.

One, it keeps us shackled and unable to live freely. Two, it promotes sameness and keeps us from expressing our holy individuality for Jesus.

When you choose to live by trusting a Person - Jesus! - moment by moment, rather than by arranging your life around 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 when Ishmael "mocked" Isaac.

***[30] But what does the Scripture say?
DRIVE OUT THE SLAVE WOMAN AND HER SON,
FOR THE SON OF THE SLAVE WOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH
THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN.***

Over the years, I have read those Genesis words and been 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 fifteen 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."***¹¹

While Abraham was in mental turmoil as to how he should deal with the situation, God told him, ***"Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her."*** (Generally good advice...).

So, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael packing. He sent them out into the desert because the son born of the flesh (Ishmael) must not be allowed to live in the same tent as the son of the promise (Isaac).

In Galatians, Paul tells this part of the Isaac / Ishmael story for a reason. He's driving home the truth that freedom and legalism must not be allowed to co-exist.

And it is now clear how we are to deal with legalism and a rules-based orientation to life in Jesus: As ruthlessly as Sarah did in sending Hagar away.

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

As we get close to closing today, and before we take the Lord's Supper together, here's my next to the last remark.

I want to offer up a diagnostic that I have found helpful in identifying when I'm living as Sarah's kid and when I'm living as Hagar's kid.

If this diagnostic lets you see that you're living more by a legalistic *"Thou shalt!"* than you are by God's liberating *"I promise!"*, great. It isn't inspired, but it might be helpful.

When living for Jesus feels like drudgery, when the thought of spending time in prayer to God seems like one more assignment, when saying *"Yes"* to obedience to truth from God's Word seems like a burden, check your mother. You may be following Hagar.

¹¹ 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!"***

When love seems more like a chore than a privilege and when the thought of serving someone in Jesus' Name rarely moves you, it is possible that you're calling the wrong mom, "*Mom.*"

If your emotional dashboard indicates you are low on joy, it may be time to send Hagar packing and go back to Sarah, your true mother.

That means, listen again to God's great promises in Jesus. Remember that you are an adopted and redeemed daughter or son of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Rest in that truth - and live in light of it.

And here's my last remark for this morning.

Conclusion:

We are now two-thirds of the way through Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. To this point, Paul has not given us one single exhortation to lead a holy life or to turn from sin; not one reference to the ideas of service or love.

Do you find that strange?

Paul has spent the first four chapters defining and defending the Gospel and fighting our natural tendency to drift toward legalism.

You could almost wonder if Paul simply doesn't care about behavior? Does he not care if we live badly, get mired in sin, and grow selfish?

Yes, it matters. It matters to God, and it mattered to Paul.

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

But to this point 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 behavior right.

Bingo.

Works are important and doing good is good. But good works have nothing to do with receiving eternal life, which, as Paul has made clear, is a gift given to the one who believes in Jesus.

First things first. First believe. Then behave.

Get the order wrong and we mess up the Gospel for those on their way and we mess up Jesus' abundant life for believers.

Get the order right and unbelievers will find a clear path to eternal life and believers will find freedom in Jesus.