

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)

The Grown-Up Church

(Galatians 4:1-11)

Study #6

Introduction: Growing up is hard to do...

“Dr. Rick,” of Progressive Insurance, provides an invaluable service to young adults who are first-time home buyers. He protects them from becoming like their parents. (Please. Watch these commercials.)

Dr. Rick warns young home buyers not to obsess about how many kinds of lettuce they can put on a salad, advises them to not talk to strangers on an elevator, and tells them to stop cleaning their garbage cans.

The ads make generational fun, specifically, of the older generation. And it's fun to make generational fun.

Dad jokes, in my opinion, are always hilarious. (I'm pretty sure that granddad jokes are even funnier.)

And the “adulthood” meme of a few years ago was great fun, especially as we were watching our own children enter adulthood around that time.

There is a “point” to all these generational jabs, of course, and especially for those who jab older. The point of the Progressive ads is that there are traits of older generations that are, frankly, cringeworthy.

And I could cite my own cringy immaturities. Complaining about the weather, eating adolescently, and talking to other drivers on Loop 1604 come to mind.

I would offer myself as Exhibit A for the idea that it is not always true that increasing years equates to increasing wisdom. Growing old doesn't always mean growing up.

Under normal circumstances, physical growth just happens. Growing up is intentional. Aging is a given; maturity is fought for.

It informs us that the New Testament is filled with exhortations to Christians and to churches to “*grow up*,” meaning, become mature.¹ It is evidently possible to NOT “*grow up*” in Jesus.

And it is compelling when we see someone of whatever age growing up, growing into maturity.

Because of the Bible passage we're looking at today, I reflected on this theme of maturity a lot this week. I thought of people I know - or have known - who modeled maturity for me.

There is about the mature a solidness, a rootedness of character that gives rest in their presence, invites our trust, compels our imitation.

Maybe someone's face or name comes to mind when I describe maturity. We would love to think that someone might use the word to describe us.

Today, Paul urges each one of us - and us, together - to maturity in Jesus.
Review...

Before we consider maturity, let's remember last week, when Paul was equipping us to fight against legalism.

¹ See 1 Corinthians 14:12; 2 Corinthians 13:9; Ephesians 4:13-15; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 5:14, 6:1 for a sampling of the many times Christians and churches are urged to maturity.

He was telling us that one way to view legalism is that it is to pay more attention to God's dealings with Moses ("*Thou shalt!*") than to God's dealings with Abraham ("*I promise!*")

Leading a "*Thou shalt!*" and a "*Thou shalt not!*" life doesn't spring from freedom, and it doesn't result in joy or power.

But leading a life that responds to all the amazing promises that we have received in Jesus results exactly in joy and power.

It was helpful to hear Paul say all of that. And we could say even more about legalism. It violates love. It discounts the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a form of self-imprisonment. It destroys relationships.

We could also say that to choose legalism is to choose immaturity.

So, to urge us to maturity in Jesus, Paul describes the generational shift that has taken place for us in Jesus. It is a shift from spiritual childhood to spiritual adulthood.

The Status of Children (vv. 1-3)

The Bondage of the Roman Child (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave² although he is owner of everything, [2] but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.

Historians estimate that when Paul wrote this letter there were about sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. So, everyone in Galatia reading this letter knew all about slavery.

As you know, the scourge of slavery is rampant in our world today. In many places, slavery is on the rise, and the 21st century slave trade and human trafficking makes Paul's comment extremely relevant.

² Doulos (Greek - Δουλος), the word used for slave here, signifies a permanent relationship of servitude to another.

We know that slaves have no rights or freedoms. That's the way it is today and it's the way it was in our own country when there was the evil of legalized slavery.

That's also the way it was in ancient Rome where the slave population consisted mostly of conquered peoples.

While we understand that there were improvements to the lives of slaves by the time of the first century,³ a slave still had no economic rights, no social privileges, and no political freedoms. The slave was still considered property of an owner.

And in that, a young child in the Roman Empire was little different than a slave.

Until a child reached the age of fourteen, he was under constant supervision by "***guardians and managers.***"⁴

The guardian regulated the child's life from morning till night. He shadowed him and taught him, scolded and disciplined him.

A child might stand to inherit a lot of money, might even be in line to receive a kingdom. But as long as he was a minor, he had no more rights and freedoms than a slave.

Paul's point? "*As in the physical world, so in the spiritual.*"

The Bondage of the Spiritual Child (v. 3)

Roughly two thousand years before Jesus was born, God chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation.

³ By the time of the writing of the New Testament, for a variety of reasons, "*sweeping humanitarian changes had been introduced into the Roman world...which led to radically improved treatment of slaves*" from The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 5, p. 458, "Slavery" by A. Rupprecht, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.

⁴ This was the "tutor" (παιδαγωγος), referenced in Galatians 3:24.

Over the first few generations, Abraham's family grew. Then, while his family was enslaved in Egypt for four centuries, it grew much larger. At the end of that enslavement, God led them to freedom, and the nation of Israel was birthed through the Red Sea at the Exodus.

Very quickly after they landed on the other side of the Red Sea, God gave them the Mosaic Law, a guide to how they could lead lives that honored Him.

Now, before reading what Paul says next, understand that Paul had great appreciation for the Mosaic Law.

He knew that the Law helped to maintain a stable society. He knew that the Law taught about God's holiness and justice. Paul knew that the Law was *[Romans 7:12] holy and righteous and good*.

Knowing all of that, listen to how he describes the Law's role in the lives of the Jews.

[3] So we too, when we were children, were held in bondage under the elementary principles⁵ of the world.

By the term "*elementary principles*" Paul was referring to Moses' Law.

The Jewish people spent fifteen hundred years in spiritual childhood. The Law told them what to do and what not to do.

The Law described how to approach God through the sacrifices. And it dictated their behavior down to some of the most minute details.

For instance, the Law told them how they were to dig latrines and deal with leprosy, what they were to eat, and how they were to settle the land of Canaan.

Those fifteen centuries of life under the Law prepared the Jews to enter spiritual adulthood. They learned their ABC's under Moses, so that they could meet Jesus - the Alpha and Omega. That was the function of the Law.

And, when Jesus was born late one December night in a Bethlehem stables, God revealed Himself in ways He never had before.

He showed the way to eternal life by faith in His Son and showed us all the way to spiritual adulthood.

Perfect Timing for a Perfect Savior (vv. 4-7)

The Timing of Christ's Coming (v. 4)

[4] But when the fullness of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law...

Jesus, God's Son, was "*born of a woman*," which is to say that Jesus didn't live in our midst as an exalted alien. No. God the Father sent His Son to be a genuine member of our race.

Jesus was "*born under the Law*." This highlights His solidarity with our plight. Jesus wasn't exempt from the Law. He was subject to it.

Then, Christ arrived, "*in the fulness of the time*." That tells us that there was an historical timeliness to Jesus' appearance.

The *pax Romana*, a time of unparalleled peace and world stability that lasted for as long as three hundred years, dominated the Western world.

There were good Roman roads and a common Greek language. Paganism's decline (in light of the bankruptcy of Greek and Roman pantheons) and the sham of a corrupt Jewish leadership left a vacuum that life with Jesus filled.

⁵ Στοικεια = elemental things; Paul uses the term here to refer to the Mosaic Law. Later (v. 9), in speaking to the Galatian Gentiles, the word refers to pagan practices. "*Elemental things*" are, generally, those things that precede faith in the one, true God.

So, the historical, social, and even the biblical⁶ ducks were all lined up for Jesus to do what He came to do. And what did Jesus come to earth to do?

The Purpose of Christ's Coming (v. 5)

[5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons and daughters.

Jesus came to earth to do something revolutionary and transforming. But it was not to establish a new world order or to reign as king over a physical empire. That will come later.

His mission is summarized here by the two terms Paul uses: *redemption* and *adoption*. The Galatians were very familiar with both.

Redeemed...

First, to speak of *redeeming* someone was to use the language of the slave trade.

In the Roman world, if an owner wanted to set a slave free, he would do so by outbidding everybody else at a slave auction, making the purchase, and THEN setting the slave free.

Christians have been redeemed from the slave market of sin by the price of Christ's death on the cross.

John Newton (author of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*) was an only child whose mother died when he was seven years old.

He went to sea at the age of eleven and got involved in what he later called "*the unspeakable atrocities of the African slave trade.*"⁷

⁶ Dr. Harold Hoehner discovered that Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He allowed the crowds to declare Him King, was precisely the day that the prophet Daniel had set for the nation to enter its messianic rest. Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Hoehner, Zondervan, 1974, pp. 138-39.

⁷ Those who have read much of American history (or have seen movies like *Amistad*, which depicts the 18th century American slave trade) will understand the depths of depravity to which a slave trader had sunk.

At the age of twenty-three, Newton came to know Christ during a terrible storm at sea. He asked God for mercy, found that mercy, and quit the slave trade.

To ensure that he never forgot the life from which God rescued him, he had Deuteronomy 15:15 written in bold letters across his mantel at home:

And you are to remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.

When you trust Jesus for eternal life, God purchases you from the slave market of sin and sets you free.

You are no longer subject to the penalty or to the power of sin. You are free to lead a life to the glory of God, a life of abundance and joy and hope in Christ.

Adopted...

Likewise, *adoption* was a very common practice in the Roman Empire, as it is today.

Some of you have firsthand knowledge of what is involved with adoption. Some of you were adopted, or you have adopted a child, or you have been witness to an adoption.

I have had the joy of watching a few adoptions from the sidelines. It is overwhelming to see...

- ...the selfless love of a birth mother who gives up her child to another, for the child's benefit.
- ...the longing of the adopting couple for a child, and their passion to bless this child who comes into their home.
- ...the total vulnerability and dependence of the adopted child - of whatever age - on the new family.

In Rome, because of the nearly absolute power of a father over his family⁸, the main emphasis in adoption was the transfer of a son from the authority of one father to the authority of a new father.

⁸ Known as "*patria postestas.*"

In fact, Roman Emperors would sometimes adopt sons to succeed them on the throne when they thought that their natural-born sons would not make good emperors. The adopted son could then lawfully become the next ruler of Rome.

The Galatian readers of this letter knew all about adoption and redemption. But they would have never dreamed of combining them.

Sure, a slave might be redeemed to be set free. And that was a wonderful redemption. Or a son of one father might be adopted by a more powerful or wealthier father, and that would be a great adoption.

Something far greater happens to Christians.

Before we place our faith in Christ, we are slaves to sin's penalty and power. It doesn't get any worse than that.

And God not only purchased our redemption out of slavery. He adopted us former slaves into His family as full-fledged, adult children.

The Effect of Christ's Coming (vv. 6-7)

Full-fledged adult children of God cry "Abba! Father!" (v. 6)

All those who believe in Jesus are no longer under any kind of a guardian. We're not underage minors in Christ.

[6] Because you are sons... (and, of course, daughters.), **God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba! Father!"**⁹

"*Abba*" is an Aramaic word for "Father." But it is the language of infancy. It's not so much like "Daddy" (a child's term). It's more like "Dada" (baby talk).

But, in Paul's day, children of all ages continued to refer to their father as "*Abba*" ("Dada"), especially at moments of great intimacy or at times of great need.

Jesus called out to God on the night before He died in the Garden of Gethsemane. He cried out, **[Mark 14:36] "Abba! Father!"** He knew that His "*Abba*" would hear Him.

So, calling God "*Abba*" is not a childish habit to be outgrown. It is a mark of maturity to be grown into.¹⁰

The Spirit of God is right now leading you to utter dependence on your heavenly Father and to trust that He is utterly faithful. He is crying out to you to cry out to God as "*Abba*."

So, if you have or have had a wonderful earthly father, you hear this and get teary-eyed at the thought of an even greater Heavenly Father than you grew up with.

If you had an absent or a weak or even a wicked father, you read these words and get teary-eyed at the thought of finally having a strong Father in whom you can rest.

If you've never known a father, you hear these words and get teary-eyed because the human heart has an *Abba*-shaped vacuum that can only be perfectly filled by God.

No matter what your experience of a father-daughter or a father-son relationship, know this for certain: In Jesus, you have a heavenly Father who is crazy about you, who loves you perfectly, whose eye is always on you, whose heart is always turned toward you.

And one more thing.
An heir of God's riches (v. 7)

[7] Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

⁹ Notice that in this passage, it is the Spirit who cries out, in our hearts, "*Abba*." In Romans 8, Paul views us as actually speaking the "*Abba*."

¹⁰ Great thoughts from Gordon Fee's wonderful book, Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God, p. 90ff.

We can all imagine being heirs. Parents often pass on to their children portions of their estate when they “pass on.”

You, God’s son or daughter, are a direct heir of God’s riches.

You have already received the gift of forgiveness. After this life is over you are guaranteed an eternity in glory with God. That’s because you are His heir.

You here today who have believed in Jesus are children of the King of kings. So were the Galatians to whom Paul was writing.

To whet our appetites for this life as fully adopted and redeemed sons and daughters of God, Paul reminds us of what life was like before life in Jesus.

Marching Toward Maturity (vv. 8-9a)

The Way Things Were (v. 8)

[8] However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are not gods.

The Jews had been in slavery to the rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law for fifteen centuries. But non-Jews had also been enslaved. They worshiped images of wood or stone that had no life. Those “gods” were demonic nothings.

And idolatry isn’t just an ancient world thing.

Broadly, the Bible defines idolatry as the *worship* of anything other than God, the *pursuit of life* in anything but God. And that is a pursuit that is alive and well in 2023.

The worship of God liberates. The worship of anything else - food, drink, power, sex, money - enslaves.

And that was us, then. Now? Well...

The Way Things Are (vv. 9a)

[9a] But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...

Now, through faith in Jesus, you have entered into a know-and-be-known relationship with God. You’ve been redeemed and adopted.

He knows you inside and out. He knows your hopes and dreams, your fears and nightmares, your failures and secret sins, and your made-in-His-image glory. He knows your whole story.

That’s true for everybody who believes in Jesus, in Galatia or in San Antonio.

But...any child of this King can choose to live as royalty in the realm of grace OR as a slave who has been neither redeemed nor adopted.

The churches of Galatia, by and large, had chosen slavery to Law rather than the freedom of grace.

That drift away from grace has been a movement Christians and churches have sadly, often, made.

It’s possible that any of us might have drifted, might have reverted, back to slavery. It is certainly possible that we might, as a church, have drifted.

There is no question but that any of us and all of us might experience more of the realities of adoption and redemption than we currently do. We could grow into greater maturity.

Hear the sadness in the words Paul writes here as he describes Christians and churches who have failed to live in the freedom for which Christ set them free.

A March Away From Maturity (vv. 9b-11)

A Tragic “About Face” (vv. 9b-10)

[9b]...how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles, to which you want to be enslaved all over again? [10] You meticulously observe days¹¹ and months and seasons and years.¹²

They began so well. What happened?

Their grace-based, joy-filled relationship with Jesus had drifted into a formal externalism where they were focused on calendars. Their reputation? *“Those Galatians sure are great at keeping their holy days!”*

What happened?

They forgot that life in Jesus is not about *“Thou shalt!”* Life in Jesus is all about living in light of God’s *“I promise!”*

They forgot that life in Jesus was not like their former life under Law. Christianity is about a relationship with a loving, heavenly Father.

That is not a trivial forgetting. It’s a forgetting of such magnitude that Paul said something really strong to them - and to us if we’ve also forgotten.

All in Vain? (v. 11)

[11] I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

Paul was not saying that people who have fallen for a legalistic approach to life in Jesus aren’t really justified, redeemed, or adopted, or that they’ve lost their justification, redemption, or adoption.

¹¹ **“Days”** here may be a reference to either Jewish (due to the influence of the troublemakers) or pagan (with astrological significance) holidays.

¹² Paul freely observed special holidays that were required under the Jewish Law. In Acts 20:16, he was hurrying to get to Jerusalem in time to celebrate Pentecost. But he wasn’t keeping Pentecost so that he could gain favor with God. Christians are free to observe certain days or not and to eat certain foods or not.

He is saying that his own labor will have been in vain if the Jesus followers he poured his life into neglect the primacy of grace.

Paul went to Galatia with the dream of seeing Jesus’ Gospel transform lives throughout that whole region.

He longed to hear the stories of how those who came to know Christ through his ministry (in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) shared the message with others who shared the message with others who also believed, were transformed, and followed Jesus.

He dreamed of a Galatian-wide turning to Jesus where lots of people he had never met were set free to know and be known by God.

But that dream would never be fulfilled if the Galatian Christians he had led to faith reverted to a *“Thou shalt!”* and a *“Thou shalt not!”* mindset, because there is nothing compelling about a group of legalists.

Jesus followers who are known for their commitment to rules-following don’t transform families, communities, or regions.¹³

Conclusion:

After spending time this week seeing all that Paul has written here, I took a step back from the trees and noticed two major themes in this forest.

¹³ There were no better rules-followers than the Pharisees, and Jesus reserved His most scathing rebukes for them.

- One. Believers in Jesus have been redeemed and adopted and are now full-fledged sons and daughters of God. (Galatians 4:1-8)
- Two, the churches of Galatia had turned to legalisms, and were known for their adherence to irrelevancies. (Galatians 4:9-10)

So, my final thoughts revolve around a two-fold, *“So what?”*

FIRST, if each of us who believes in Jesus is a redeemed and adopted child of God, we should each live like it. Each of us should take pains to grow as Jesus’ disciple.

So, what will be the “next step” you take into a self-denying, cross-carrying life of discipleship?

Will it be...

...a courageous step into community, where you pursue relationship and personal connection with other Jesus followers?

...a loving step away from sexual sin and into purity?

...a bold step into witness for Jesus at school or at work?

...a vulnerable step into open transparency where you are honest about struggles and seek help from brothers and sisters in Jesus?

You can begin taking any of these steps today - or others! - into a “spiritually congruent maturity” where the way you live matches God’s calling on your life.

SECOND, if Paul was concerned that the Galatian churches were obsessing over irrelevancies (i.e., calendars), we should be careful that we, here, don’t get derailed into irrelevancies, too. We need to aim with laser-like focus on the purpose for which our church exists.

There are so many things going on today that could occupy our congregational attention. These are very distractable times, making it difficult to focus on the main thing.¹⁴

And, as many others have so often noted, the main thing of any group is to keep the main thing the main thing. That is a crucial timeless truth for the church of Jesus.

We only have so much bandwidth here.

To maximize our effectiveness, we must make it our congregational aim to pay primary attention to the essentials of the cross of Jesus, the primacy of faith, God’s amazing grace, service, and love.

This - keeping the main thing the main thing - is an unmistakable mark of the grown-up church.

And when we do that, we will, by God’s grace, grow what we and our world so desperately need: a culture of grace.

¹⁴ To name a few: politics (national, state, local), climate, international conflicts; the economy; Covid (or the next “covid-like” event); the crisis at the border; cultural shifts; etc...