

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)

FREE...Now What?

(Galatians 5:1-15)

Study #8

Introduction: The problem of recidivism...

According to statistics I found this past week, there are some 136,000 prison inmates in the state of Texas.¹

The men and women in these prisons have lost a lot of the freedoms that we on the outside enjoy. A prisoner can't go where she wants to go. An inmate can't fully pursue his dreams.

Prisoners may remain behind bars for years, longing for freedoms that you and I take for granted.

But then, the day comes when the prisoner has paid his debt to society. The prison term ends, and he is released. The day he has dreamed of arrives and he walks out a free man.

Why is it, then, that 20% of those who are released from prison in Texas commit crimes and return to prison within three years?

We call that boomerang of prison to freedom back to prison *recidivism*. And recidivism is not what we would expect.

We would think that having lost the priceless gift of freedom, a freed inmate would make the most of a return to freedom.

We would think that he would do everything in his power to never lose that freedom again. He would work hard to stay out of jail.

The frequency of recidivism, though, tells us that while we all do long for freedom, that longing is not a strong enough pull to keep some people out of a life behind bars.

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

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

For all its restrictions, prison life is at least straightforward.

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

As it is in the world of prisons, so it is in the realm of the spirit.

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

Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians because they were banging on the doors of their former jail cells, wanting to get back in.

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

Today, Paul urges us to turn away from the prison of legalism and enter the life of freedom Jesus died and rose again to give us.

As we look at our Bibles for the morning, we will be skipping around in the passage a bit. But the best and only place to begin is at verse one.

Paul cuts to the chase and offers a radical "take" on the defining purpose for giving us the gift of eternal life.

¹ As of the end of the year 2020.

Freedom, Central to Life in Jesus (v. 1)²

[1] It was for freedom that Christ set us free...

Your freedom was central to what Jesus had in mind as He went to the cross. That you and I live in the realm of spiritual freedom is that important to God.

When you believe in Jesus, you are instantly set free from the guilt of your sin and from the condemning judgment of God.

You are also set free to enter a life of liberty that is filled with grace and truth, that is marked by dependence on God, and that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But, as Paul says here, you and I have a part to play in this freedom drama.

[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.

We must stand firm because there are spiritual forces that want us back in chains. There are even people who want us to be subject to a **“yoke of slavery.”** That word - **“yoke”** - conjures up quite an image.

Imagine a scene from Texas a century and a half ago.

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

Quick. When you picture that scene, do you think **“JOY!”** or **“FREEDOM!”**? No. A **“yoke of slavery”** conjures up images of monotonous drudgery.

But the life to which God calls us IS a life of freedom and joy.³

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

That is what GRACE is all about.

Before, we couldn’t measure up. Now that we know Jesus, what is changed is NOT that we do measure up. It’s that we now “get” that measuring up was never the point in the first place.

We have been made God’s sons and daughters through faith in Jesus. But that’s not because we aced some spiritual bar exam. Because of what He did for us, it is now our birthright to live in freedom.

And here’s the thing. We might not embrace that birthright. We might submit to legalism and to a rules-based orientation to life with God. It’s true. A child of God just might submit to a yoke of slavery.

In what follows, Paul speaks about as bluntly as he does in any place in his writings about what is at stake when a believer chooses legalism over freedom.

Let’s consider now what he has to say.

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

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

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

No benefit from Jesus (v. 2)

[2] Look! I, Paul, tell you that if you have yourselves circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

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

³ A *yoke* is the dominating reality in a person’s life. To not know Christ is to be under the yoke of sin, the Law, guilt, and the judgment of God. Jesus offers His own yoke, which He says is **“comfortable”** and **“light.”** (Matthew 11:30)

Paul is imagining some guy in Galatia who has trusted in Jesus for eternal life.

This guy decides that to start following the Mosaic Law (maybe even getting circumcised) is the best way to get closer to God, or to make himself more godly.⁴

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

Paul says that ***“Christ will be of no benefit”*** to that man. So, what does Paul mean by this?

Is he saying that this man who has opted for a legalistic life has lost his justification before God? Does a Christian who has become a Pharisee cease being a Christian, lose his or her status as God’s child?

No! Remember that Paul has not been writing to people whose eternal life was in question.

He’s certain that they have eternal life and he established that from the beginning of this letter. He is writing to people who know Jesus.⁵

His point is that if someone who has come to know God through faith in Jesus - he has eternal life - turns to legalism, then in this life, Jesus will do them no good.

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

And there is more.

⁴ The Old Testament rite of male circumcision was given as a sign of the covenant (Genesis 17), *after* Abraham was justified. It was expressly made a part of Israel’s corporate life in Leviticus 12. But circumcision was never tied to justification before God, until it was mistakenly done so before (by Pharisees and others) and during the early New Testament era.

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

You can’t be “a little bit” legalistic (v. 3)

[3] And I testify again to every man who has himself circumcised, that he is obligated to keep the whole Law.⁶

The point Paul is making here is that the Mosaic Law isn’t a pick-and-choose cafeteria line.

Once the “camel” of Law gets its nose under the tent, it’s soon all in the tent. Once a Christian in Paul’s day started following Moses’ Law, it would eventually overwhelm his entire life.

For us, today, the point is that once we start on the road of thinking that how well we are doing has anything to do with our standing before God, that thinking begins to overwhelm.

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

Legalism consumes. It devours. The legalist usually becomes stricter and narrower and more rigid and less flexible and less compassionate, more judgmental.

Better to stomp out legalism, a works orientation, a focus on rules, and a *“Thou shalt!”* mentality as soon as we become aware of it and embrace the way of grace.⁷

Spiritual disciplines and wholesome habits and doing good are all wonderful things. It’s good to do good.

But the path to the freedom God wants for you AND for us as a church is marked by an all-consuming preoccupation with what Jesus has done, not with what we have or haven’t done.

⁶ See James 2:10 and Romans 2:25 for the same thought.

⁷ To pursue Christian growth by means of obedience to the Law would have required the Galatians to make sacrifices in a certain way, dig their latrines in a certain way, go to Jerusalem for festivals three times a year, reap the corners of their fields at harvest times - and carry out some 600 other commandments.

Then, in more, very severe language, Paul says that when we travel the road of legalism, we've taken a jump off a cliff.

Fallen from grace (v. 4)

[4] You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Remember what Paul has been hammering home in this letter. He is highlighting the freedom dividend Christ gives us when we embrace grace, faith, and the way of the Spirit here and now, in this life.

He has urged us to **"keep standing firm"** in that freedom.

Now, he just says out loud what we have done when we don't stand firm in freedom. We have stumbled and taken a *"fall from grace."*

Again, that doesn't mean that sons and daughters of God are all of a sudden un-adopted, un-justified, and un-redeemed.

It does mean that if we abandon the way of freedom in Jesus, we have **"been severed"** from the energizing power of Jesus. Yep. This fight for freedom and this rejection of legalism is that serious.

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

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

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

We can stay vitally connected to Jesus if we stand firm in grace.

If you have drifted away from grace, paddle back to the middle of the stream of His grace. If you have fallen from grace, rise. Declare your dependence on Him.

There is hope for freedom in a grace-filled walk with Jesus. There is no hope for freedom in a *"Look at what I've done"* kind of Christianity.

Now, back to Galatians. Some visitors from Jerusalem wanted to open the door of legalism and lead the Christians there back into prison. They were hoping for spiritual recidivism.

So, Paul has words for anyone who would lead Christians away from freedom.

Disastrous results for leading others into legalism (vv. 7-10, 12)

Who derailed you? (vv. 7-10a)

[7] You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? [8] This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. [9] A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. [10a] I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view...

Around here, we talk about "impact disproportionate to our size" in a positive way. We pray that God will allow us, as a church, to have impact greater than our size would usually produce so that all glory goes to God. I love it when that happens!

Well, here's the flip side of that idea. Wherever they go, legalists have a negative influence disproportionate to their numbers. They are like leaven, yeast in a lump of dough.⁸

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

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

⁸ In Scripture, leaven is often (although not always) symbolic of sin. Leaven was removed from Jewish homes before Passover as a sign of purification, and leaven was not allowed in some Old Testament sacrifices. See also Mt. 16:6 and 1 Cor. 5:6-8 for other symbolic references to leaven. It is used in a good sense in parables found in Matthew 13 and Luke 13.

If legalism gains a foothold in a church, that church's vitality will be lost. Legalists will pile on rules so thick that freedom is nothing but a hazy memory.

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

I imagine that the mood, the culture, of a church dominated by legalism will be one of two extremes.

There might be arrogance and pride because good things are getting done - *"Look at us, aren't we doing great!"*

Or there could be a defeatist air of stagnation because of repeated failures to "measure up."

People in a legalistic church are doing what they do, motivated by guilt.⁹ The focus is on what they have done and what they must do.

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

On the other hand, the church that is living in freedom is focused on the wonderful work Jesus accomplished on the cross.

They are excited about God's amazing grace. They are caught up in what Jesus is doing today in their lives and in the church.

The people in the church living in freedom are both aware of their sin and overwhelmed with gratitude to God for their forgiveness.

They obey God because of grace received. They are moved to serve out of a "want-to" motivation. AND they want to hear Jesus' *"Well done!"* and they are eager to receive the rewards He promised for faithfully serving Him.

They aren't perfect, sure - and they confess their sins. But, out of their brokenness and repentance comes God's strength.

They challenge each other to hard obediences. They cheer each other on to faithfulness. They accept where each one is on his or her own journey of faith.

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

In the Gospels, Jesus' strongest rebukes were reserved for the legalist,¹⁰ so Paul lets fly with a little fire here.

Judgment for the derailers! (vv. 10b, 12)

[10b] but the one who is disturbing you will bear his punishment, whoever he is...[12] I wish that those who are troubling you would even emasculate themselves.

Yep. That's graphic. And I'm sure that Paul meant it figuratively. But the sense is clear. Paul doesn't want these legalists reproducing.

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

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

The Beauty of Freedom (vv. 5-6)

[5] For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. [6] For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

There are so many things in life which, on the one hand and to some degree, matter, but which, in the grandest scheme of things, don't matter.

⁹ The time-tested method involving: *Need + Availability + Guilt* (NAG, for short).

¹⁰ See Matthew 23 and note what Jesus had to say to the Pharisees.

Keeping a set of rules - Mosaic or otherwise - doesn't matter.

And it doesn't matter what you eat, what you drink, what you drive, where you live, or what level of schooling you have received.

The quality of your singing voice, your level of sacrifice, and your life's backstory don't matter.

What really matters before God *"faith working through love."*

Or, as Paul wrote in another letter, *[1 Corinthians 13:1] If I speak with the tongues of mankind and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. [3] And if I give away all my possessions to charity, and if I surrender my body so that I may glory, but do not have love, it does me no good.*

This is what matters to God: that we trust Him, and that our trust in Him works itself out in love for Him and others.¹¹

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

Growing in Christ is always all about love. Any idea about what maturity looks like that doesn't zero in on love is wrong.¹²

The one unmistakable mark of progress in a walk with God is love.

Knowledge is not the essence of spiritual maturity. Neither is social poise, or leadership acumen, or theological sophistication.

It's sacrificial, lay-down-your-life, forgive-your-enemies love.

So, today, let's all embrace what matters to Jesus. Faith working through love is what we were made for. It's why we were set free.

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

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

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

[13a] For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh¹³

Paul knows us all well enough to know that this warning is warranted. *"You're free. But be careful that you don't use your freedom selfishly. Don't use your freedom to live sinfully."*

It's a good warning. But notice that this is the only warning against the misuse of freedom we find in the entire letter.

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

Paul wasn't afraid of grace.

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

The biggest threat to vibrant Christianity is that we who believe would embrace shackles and become legalists, that we would adopt a

¹¹ We know from elsewhere that *"without faith it is impossible to please God"* (Heb. 11:6) and that faith, hope, and love abide *"but the greatest of these is love"* (1 Cor. 13:13).

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

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

rules orientation to life in Jesus, and that we would be guilty of spiritual recidivism.

All of that would cut us off from the joy of Jesus and that would leave us with no power to entice others toward Jesus.

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

We haven't been granted freedom in Jesus so that we can lead more self-centered lives.¹⁴

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

That isn't our calling. We've been freed from the clutches of sin so that we will swim upstream, against the current into something glorious for Jesus.

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

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

One of the inviolable laws of human experience is that everybody serves something - and there are lots of options.

We can serve the stuff we own, our toys and treasures, or our personal pleasures. Or we can serve others in Jesus' Name.

It's our choice. But to live as we were redeemed to live is to lovingly serve others in His Name and for His sake.

That kind of an others-centered life focus is beautiful, enticing, compelling. It brings glory to God and shows others that we are His.

¹⁴ For the same thought, see *[1 Peter 2:16] Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond-servants of God.*

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

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

Christian Cannibalism (v. 15)

[15] But if you bite and devour one another¹⁶, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

That's quite the image. It's like the two snakes that bit each other on the tail and swallowed each other whole. The church that doesn't foster freedom and that doesn't major on loving service will consume itself.

Now, not that you would want to do this, but what would you do if you wanted to encourage biting and devouring, here at church?

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

- We could speak discouraging words and be spiteful and petty.
- We could creatively sow disharmony by gossip.
- We could keep conversation trivial and not speak to each other about heart matters.
- We could neglect to pray for each other.
- We could stop contributing our time, treasure and talent to the ministries of the church.

These are all effective ways to actively contribute to a "**bite and devour**" culture. But there are also effective passive means.

Don't forget apathy and inaction, withdrawal and sideline-sitting as these all work well, too.

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

¹⁶ In ancient writings this phrase, "**bite and devour**," pictured wild dog fights.

So, what I'm going to do now, after our time of considering the freedom we have in Jesus to love and to serve, is urge you to love and service by using guilt, heavy-handed manipulation, and arm-twisting.

Or..., how about if, here at the end, we imagine life together in Jesus, just like He designed it. Let's imagine growing a culture of grace.

Conclusion:

Remember. You became a redeemed and justified son or daughter of God when you believed in Jesus. The Spirit of God dwells in you.

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

On a personal level, Paul has told us that ***"faith working through love"*** is what matters and that other things mean nothing.

He may be inviting us all to a thought experiment.

He might be calling us all to consider the various elements of our lives, everything from calendars to budgets categories to entertainment and recreation options, and ask ourselves:

*"Have I given prominence to things that don't really mean anything at all? Could I eliminate these so that there would be more room for ***"faith working through love"***?"*

If we conduct this thought experiment and uncover something that is getting in the way of ***"faith working through love,"*** the call will then be to remove it and make space for ***"faith working through love."***

On a congregational level, growing a culture of grace involves saying "Yes!" to Paul's call to ***"serve one another in love."***

Here, the call to us all is simply to open our eyes and look, open our ears and listen for ways to serve each other in Jesus' Name.

We will all be amazed at the ways we might serve each other if we will simply be attentive to what is right before us.

Look. Listen. Then, by the grace God supplies, serve in Jesus' Name.