

I would guess that whether you ask a religious or non-religious individual in our modern world, regardless of context, what the most important thing is for our modern world, they would articulate some form of the idea of freedom: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This is ingrained into who we are, central to what it means to be an American and what it means to exist in the modern world. Without question, this has been the source of incalculable good in our world. It has resulted in individual rights, freedom of speech, personal choice, etc. All sorts of good. But it was not without its faults.

If you survey the landscape of American life, you don't have to look far to realize it is no utopia. Increasing levels of addiction to substances across the country, food insecurity issues, economic disparities are rising, a legacy of racism that is still shaping our current world, the decline of fidelity to marriage, etc.

History is always a mixed bag of good and bad. It is nuanced, grey, and ebbs and flows of pain and hurt. While I know that correlation is not causation, I might suggest that as we look at the great American experiment of building a society on freedom, the struggles and pains we see today should drive us to consider the question, "What does it mean to be free?" Does our modern understanding of freedom align with the freedom as defined by Jesus, Paul, and the New Testament?

Because what we will find is our conception of freedom is different than how we normally, in the modern world, think of freedom. The freedom of our modern world is largely built on the very basic idea that we can and should do whatever we want. No constraints, nothing external, should inhibit me from self-actualizing and becoming the person that I want and believe I should become. This is how we conceive of freedom. And again, this has brought a lot of good to the world.

Unfettered freedom, as defined by our modern minds, requires connection to a deeper identity. If we fail to adhere to a larger understanding of the world, we will live in an incoherent world that cannot sustain this vision of freedom. It necessitates an identity that roots and grounds itself in some to guide its adherents to a vision of "the good."

This is why Jesus and the writers of the New Testament define freedom differently. The biblical definition of freedom is not freedom from all things, but it is freedom to something/someone. It is a freedom that roots itself in an identity as a child of God, and from that place, we learn to live consistent with the grain of the universe. In our freedom, we have the ability to say no to that which is inherent within us that draws us away from the good. It is a radical reversal of our conception of freedom.

It is in this environment that we read Paul's words, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*" (Gal. 5:1a). Paul is going to draw much of his argument that has taken place over the last three chapters to a close. He writes out of concern that what has taken place in the church in Galatia is the exchange of an identity built on Christ and the freedom we have in that, being exchanged for a return to enslavement to the law.

Paul will continue from this text into a lengthy discussion about freedom and how we enter into that life now. That he will then transition in the last half of chapter 5 to a discussion on life "in the Spirit" and how that brings about the freedom for which we are longing.

All along in Galatians, this has been the target of the discussion. Here is the bottom line that Paul is driving toward. Standing firm in the freedom of Christ requires embracing our sole identity as children of God. No other identity will do, not for the Galatians and not for ourselves. Paul is going to make an impassioned plea with the Galatians to not retreat from their freedom in Christ to enslavement back into the law.

*"I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you."* (v. 12a). Paul's appeal begins with an emotional plea. Throughout this section of the letter, you will see Paul's pastoral heart bleed through the pages. In a similar manner of a concerned parent, Paul is longing for their return to the gospel they once knew. Paul's appeal for the church in Galatia is to "become like me," to imitate him as he imitates Christ. What a profound thing to say. And what an aspiration for us all. Is the image of Christ so formed in us that we are comfortable saying, "become like me?"

Earlier, Paul's phrasing for this was that he was "crucified with Christ." All the status that was in Paul's previous life was crucified so that Christ now lives in him as the defining factor of his connection to the family of God. The second part of Paul's appeal, "for I became like you," is in reference to his becoming like a Gentile in his connection to God by no longer viewing it through observance to the law.

*"You did me no wrong"* (v. 12b). Throughout this section, you see glimpses of Pastor Paul's heart breaking. So much of the letter has been direct confrontation, challenge, and admonishment. But here, you see Paul's heart breaking for the people he so dearly loved. As a pastor, I can resonate with his heart here.

Paul is ensuring that they know his intent is not to accuse the Galatians of any wrongdoing against him. Certainly, the severity with which Paul is speaking would have put them on the defense. Paul continues with a segment on his gratitude for their history of taking care of him in previous encounters.

**As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. vv. 13-14**

Referencing back to Paul's time with them that was circumstantial due to an illness, he reflects fondly on their care for him. The illness that plagued Paul is unknown to us, but he clearly remembers their tender care through the whole ordeal, noting specifically that it was a challenge for them to care for him, but they did so with great love. "Treating him as an angel of God, or Christ Jesus himself." This is an intimate appeal to the depth of the relationship prior to all this conflict.

You feel it. You can sense that Paul is broken over this church that he loves so dearly, wandering from the freedom they have—seeing the way they are caught in cycles of brokenness, which is causing harm to themselves and the fellow believers around them.

**Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? vv. 15-16**

The mystery for Paul is that the relationship was strong. They had blessed him prior in the midst of challenging circumstances. But now that conflict has come up; they are withholding blessing and care. Paul goes so far as to say, "you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me." This is a stock metaphor, similar to our expression, "I gave my right arm for you." The point is they would have done nearly anything for Paul. The somewhat rhetorical question at the end of 16 is poignant, "have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" Isn't this exactly what friends should do? Tell them the truth when they have been deterred from the truth?

Part of the dynamics of being a church of loving and caring for others is the need to both be able to confront with honesty and humility, as well as be open and vulnerable enough to receive this level of honesty. This is part and parcel of being part of a local community of faith.

**Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. vv. 17-18**

Having appealed to their intimate friendship and the trust built therein, he turns his attention to those rival teachers. Saying that "They want to win you over but for no good. They do not care for your well-being; they are trying to pull you away from the truth."

They were trying to alienate and separate the Galatians from Paul's converts to the gospel. Paul is contrasting his own personal motivations as detailed in verses 15-16 and pointing to debased motives from the rival teachers, saying that the rival teachers only desire to stir a movement on their side. For Paul, the problem is not zeal but a rather misplaced

passion. This is what he identifies in the rival teachers. They are zealous for all the wrong things, things that are leading the church astray.

The same can be true of us. "It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good." There is a concern for a passion that is aimed in the wrong direction. Church, this is instructive for us. There is a narrow and direct focus that Paul has as his mission, to do the work of the gospel. I think a good question we should be asking at this point is, "Have we grown zealous over things less than the gospel?" This is a question we have to be ruthlessly honest about. The rival teachers that Paul was speaking about believed they had their priorities in line in defense.

What would Paul's assessment of us be? Here's the problem. We don't always know when we are consumed by zealotry for the wrong things. More often than not, we don't. Because we always have ways of justifying our actions. That's, in fact, why we do the things we do because somewhere in our minds, it is justified.

And you can feel Paul's heartbreaking in this text. Particularly as he closes this section. "*My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!*" (vv. 19-20). Paul's almost sporadic tone throughout these verses demonstrates the emotional toll this was taking on Paul. At one point, he is perplexed, the next indignant, and now you see the tender heart of a parent longing for his children to be restored. The language has moved deeper into intimacy, from friendship to now the language of family.

There are moments in the New Testament when you see a pastor's heart for the church. This is one of those moments. It is hard to describe the relationship between a pastor and congregation. But I can assure you that I can not only understand Paul's sentiment here, but I can feel it. Can you Church? I long for us to have Christ formed in us. It is the driving passion of everything we do here at CPC to see Christ formed within us both individually and as a community.

The imagery of childbirth is meant to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that Paul is willing to endure whatever pain and anguish are required for Christ to be formed in them. I don't think it is surprising that Paul uses the imagery of maternal love for his church. The tenderness mixed with the fierceness

So, to summarize the verse section of the text, Paul is concerned, perplexed, and pleading with this church that he loves so dearly that they do not turn from the freedom they have been given in the gospel to the enslavement of the law that is now obsolete by the work of Christ.

Here is the main idea that I want to communicate to you all. Standing firm in the freedom of Christ requires embracing our sole identity as children of God. This is what Paul is making abundantly clear. The Galatians are children of the promise that was given to Abraham; therefore, they must resist anything that threatens that freedom, specifically those Jewish Christians trying to impose the law on them. And having made the personal appeal, Paul will argue for this, admonishing them to stand firm in their identity as children of God by using the story of

Abraham's two sons through Hagar and Sarah as an allegory for their current situation.

In this allegory, he will talk about two sons, from two women, that created two families, from which two covenants were given, on two mountains. And in this "tale of twos," Paul is laying out the decision before the Galatian churches, "Which do you choose?" Do you choose to live free as the child of God, promised entrance into the family by faith alone? Or do you choose to be enslaved to the law that cannot bring about the life you think it can?

*"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman" (vv. 21-22).* For the rest of what follows, these verses serve as introductory comments. There is a certain level of irony in the opening line. Paul's listeners were Torah-obsessed, and he tells them to pay attention to the Torah!

Paul's appeal to them is to sketch out the story of Abraham's sons through contrasting the lineage of those who came from Hagar and those who came from Sarah. In this Sarah/Hagar allegory, Paul is drawing all sorts of comparisons and contrasts, using the categories of slave/free, and flesh/promise. Abraham's son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

**These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. vv. 24-26**

Paul now extends the allegory beyond what the text in Genesis would offer, and he explicitly says so by saying, "these things are being taken figuratively." Meaning, he is interpreting, he is exegeting, he is preaching the story from Genesis. For Paul, the two women are spoken of as two covenants, and this is developed by Paul in two streams—one stream that leads to slavery under the law, Hagar, and the second stream that leads to freedom, Sarah.

The heart of the allegory Paul is developing is in verses 25-26 and warrants us spending some time here. Let's spend a few minutes talking about what Paul means by "Present Jerusalem" and "Jerusalem Above."

Present city of Jerusalem: The lineage of Hagar that is bound by Mosaic Law in connection to Mount Sinai is representative of current Jerusalem. Meaning, the Jews who are currently demanding adherence to the law are those represented here. They are still stuck in the law, stuck in that which was only meant to be a concession to the present evil age. It was never meant to go beyond that but was only the result of circumstances.

Jerusalem that is above: What does Paul mean by the "Jerusalem that is above"? Better than allegorical language, this should actually be viewed as apocalyptic language. The Jerusalem that is above is a direct reference to the Jewish hope of "New Creation." That is, the hope that God will

one day reunite Heaven and Earth, and in doing so, would extinguish what Paul called in chapter 1 of Galatians "the present evil age."

**The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; Rev. 3:12 (emphasis mine)**

*"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." (Rev. 21:2, emphasis mine).* The hope has always been that God will bring heaven down, and in Jesus inaugurating the Kingdom of God, he has, in fact, done that! This is the trajectory of the entire story.

It is necessary to say that when Paul speaks of the "Jerusalem above," he is not saying that the ultimate destiny of God's people is to "go to heaven" (some disembodied place above). The point here, as in Revelation 3 and 21 and the entire structure of Jewish Hope, was that the New Jerusalem would be brought from heaven to earth in the final great act of renewal.

And so here is what Paul is saying, for those in the lineage of Hagar, they are stuck living in the present evil age, from the Jerusalem that falls short of God's intended plan. But for those who are in the lineage of Sarah, they are a part of the Jerusalem that is above! They are a part of the New Creation that is to come, liberated from the bondage of the "present evil age."

The invitation from Paul is that the choice of which Jerusalem to follow is before them. To follow the "present Jerusalem" is to inherit the lineage of slavery to the law. To follow the Jerusalem "from above" is to inherit the lineage of New Creation.

**For it is written: "Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." v. 27**

Paul adds to his comments here a scriptural reference from Isaiah 54:1, which opens up the understanding that those who are from the "Jerusalem above" are a part of a new humanity that is comprised of people from every tribe, nation, and tongue.

The "barren woman" that is referenced in Isaiah is Sarah. Remember, Abraham and Sarah couldn't conceive, but God promised their children would outnumber the stars. Meaning many nations and peoples would come from Abraham and Sarah's lineage, the lineage of the promise.

As the prophet attests, this would result in shouts of joy and crying aloud because of the work of God in broadening this new humanity to Jew and Gentile alike! As Paul turns toward the close of this segment, he is drawing this idea of the family of God even more intimately.

**Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never**

**share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." vv. 28-30**

Paul turns to the Galatians in familial terms, "Now you, brothers and sisters, are children of promise." As Brandon eloquently reminded us last week, we must remember who we are. This is what Paul is doing right here. He is reminding the church that they are children of the promise. They are children of the gospel. This is our identity as individuals and collectively as the people of God.

Turning his attention back to the rival teachers trying to hold the Gentiles and the new church back in their newly found freedom. Paul says that they are following in the very steps of Ishmael, the lineage Paul claims they are from, by persecuting the new believers. If you remember, in Genesis 21, Sarah catches Ishmael, Hagar's son, mocking Isaac and is furious. Paul says the rival teachers are now doing the same thing but with a different action.

For Paul, to lay a burden of the law on another is to actively damage and cause harm to the recipient. Consider the posture that Paul is speaking against. Church, where have we placed undue burdens on others? Where do we heap laws and hoops for people to jump through in order to be in the family of God? We should take great care in how we interact with others. Paul communicates the seriousness of such an offense.

Now, remember that Paul is drawing on a rich allegory of the story of Hagar and Sarah. And as he comes to the conclusion, the text can seem offensive, but when understood allegorically, we can make greater sense of it. "Get rid of the slave woman and her son..." Because they will never inherit the promise because they are refusing to live out the implications of the promise that are made manifest in light of the work of the Messiah!

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman" (v. 31).* "Therefore, in light of all that I have just commanded, in light of all that I have just unpacked—step into your identity as children of the free woman." This is the concluding and summative statement to which the entire letter and certainly this entire section has been pointing!

And it starts with a familial tone, "Brothers and sisters, we are children of the free woman! And we should live accordingly." Consider again the argument Paul has laid out, remembering that all of this is allegorical use. The choice was always before them on which family they identify. They are children of the free lineage; they are no longer under that which was born under enslavement to the law.

Paul's final statement in this section, which continues into chapter 5, is that it is for freedom we have been set free. *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1).* Paul makes a strong declaration of what the

work of the Messiah accomplished, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

Pauline freedom is the freedom to live into and experience the Kingdom of God in the present. We inhabit and embody this freedom that is the collective broadening of the family that Christ is developing. No longer are we to find our identity in that which drags us into a yoke of slavery. The entire discussion has been built around identity. We are to identify with our true identity as children of God; this alone is who we are when we are brought into union with Christ.

Paul's argument is a good one. And I think it leads to a good question for us today as well. Church, where are you tempted to put on a yoke of slavery? Where are you finding security and rest in things other than God? Where are you giving up your freedom for the yoke of slavery? If we place our identity in anything other than that of God, we will find ourselves embracing a yoke of slavery that we cannot untangle.

As we were talking through this message earlier this week with a team of people who help plan and coordinate our services, someone reminded me of Jesus' words in John chapter 8 and an exchange Jesus had about his identity and the repercussions that had for his followers.

Read [John 8:31-36](#).

Notice a few things. For Jesus, freedom is not the removal of all constraints but is the coming under obedience to Jesus. This is where freedom is found, not in zero constraints, but coming under the direction, training, and apprenticeship to Jesus.

Paul is going to continue to get more and more practical in how we live into this freedom and what this freedom looks like in our lives. But for today, we are at a more basic level. It is the level that we simply embrace our identity as a child of God. I wonder what it would look like for you, me this week, to simply sit before God and ask for our identities to be exposed to us. Where do we find ourselves tied to things less than God? What lesser identities have we allowed to enslave us? Because Church, we are free indeed. We are liberated to live under the rule and reign of Lord Jesus.

What are you enslaved to church? Where are you rejecting your identity as a son or a daughter of God? Our world, our place in the world, is ripe with that which can enslave us. It can entrap us and hold us in bondage to all that is less than God. The sin that so easily entangles restricts us from living in the freedom offered by obedience to Christ.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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