

Galatians: Faith Alone in Christ Alone

True Gospel Freedom (Galatians 4:8-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 7, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ So far in Galatians, Paul has been arguing his point using various motifs. He's leaned heavily on the imagery of slavery or captivity. He's described life apart from Christ as being enslaved or imprisoned. Held captive under the Law (3:23). Imprisoned under sin (3:22). Enslaved to the elementary principles of the world (4:3). And he keeps describing our conversion to Christ as an emancipation – as a liberation from our former enslavement or imprisonment.
 - And this is why Paul is so perplexed when he hears that these Gentile Christians – who were converted under his ministry – are so persuadable to adopt Jewish law and custom. Especially treating it as a means to secure God's favor and salvation. They're behaving like Jews in keeping Sabbath, observing feast days, abiding by food laws and other cleanliness rules. And Gentile men are even considering circumcision.
 - Paul thinks that's crazy. If you're free in Christ, why would you subject yourself to captivity all over again? Why aren't you enjoying your freedom? **I think one of the takeaways here is that enslavement (or captivity) is ultimately a mindset that you need to shake.** That the chains are necessarily on your ankles or wrists – but around your mind and in your heart.

- ❖ One of my favorite movies is *The Shawshank Redemption*. If you're not familiar with it, Shawshank is a prison. The movie is set in the mid-twentieth century. There's a side character names Brooks Hatlen. He's an elderly inmate who runs the prison library. He's presented as a sympathetic character. Kind and gentle. He hand-raised a pet bird.
 - But midway in the film, Brooks is paroled after serving 50 years of his sentence. And his response is shocking. This elderly man is so distraught at the prospect of parole that he threatens to kill a fellow inmate so he can be reincarcerated. His friends talk him down. He does get paroled. But he has great difficulty adjusting to life outside of prison. He wishes to go back to Shawshank. He finds escape by hanging himself.
 - When his friends in Shawshank read his final letter and hear about his fate, they lament how Brooks was imprisoned for so long that that became his reality. Freedom didn't feel free. Life outside that jail cell felt like prison to him. He had been institutionalized. Being a prisoner had become his identity.

- ❖ I hope that's a helpful illustration to illuminate our text. We're going to see Paul extend this imagery of captivity. And he'll demonstrate that regardless of your circumstances – whether you're living a life ignorant of God's laws OR you're living a life strictly trying to obey them – either way you can still be enslaved. No matter what context you're in – what kind of life you commit to – you can carry your captivity with you in your mind and in your heart.
 - **If a prisoner mindset is embedded in your identity, then you'll remain in that state even if you get religious.** You would think that embracing religion; revering God's Word; being zealous to follow everything in it – you would think that's the path of freedom. But you could still be enslaved – even by religion. **What we need is a clear distinction between mere human religion and true gospel freedom.** That's what this text does. It'll accomplish two things: (1) It'll expose within you in a bedrock of legalism. And (2) it'll entreat you to love as those truly free in Christ.

Exposing Within You a Bedrock of Legalism

- ❖ Let's start by considering how this text exposes within us a bedrock of legalism. What do we even mean by that? **What we mean is that human beings are all legalists by nature.** Our hearts are broken by the effects of sin. They're damaged with a legalistic bent. Meaning our default mode is a works-based mindset that relies on what we do or don't do.
 - This is all inferred from Paul's warning to the Galatians in vv8-11. **Remember, his primary audience are the Gentile believers in the church who formally worshipped pagan gods.** And they used to live immoral lives, consistent with the depraved nature of pagan idol worship. That's why Paul says in v8 that, prior to knowing God, they were formally enslaved to idolatry. Back in chapter 4:3, he described it as being enslaved to "*the elementary principles of the world.*" We said, last time, that that was a reference to the four elemental spirits of earth, air, water, and fire. Ancient Greeks worshipped these elements as idols, giving them names like Poseidon and Hephaestus, etc.
 - Paul references these idols again in our text. "*⁸Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. ⁹But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*"
- ❖ **Paul is asking these Gentile Galatians: How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless idols you used to worship?** Why do you want to be enslaved to them once more?
 - Now based on that – like if you skipped everything prior and started reading the letter here in this paragraph – **you would think these Gentile Galatians were starting to fall back into their idolatrous pagan practices.** Maybe worshipping again in the temples of Greek gods. Readopting an immoral, licentious lifestyle so characteristic of pagans. You would think that's what's going on.
- ❖ But you'd be wrong. **Because everything that came prior makes it clear that these Gentile believers aren't being tempted to fall back into paganism. They're being tempted to embrace legalism!** They're open to adopting Jewish law and custom as part and parcel of being a Christian. They're not flaunting their freedom with an attitude that says, "I can do whatever I want. It's not a big deal if I disobey God's law because I'm already justified." No, they're not gravitating towards a licentious paganism.
 - **They're moving towards a moralistic legalism.** Look at v10. They're observing Sabbath. They're keeping new moons. They're adopting all the various Jewish feast days and festivals dictated in the Law of Moses. And we know, from the overall context, that these Gentile believers are contemplating circumcision.
 - Do you see what Paul is suggesting? He's equating their willingness to submit to the Law with their former idolatry. **Equating their former paganism with their newfound interest in legalism.** He's saying that both have a common foundation, and that either path is marked by captivity and enslavement.

- ❖ **Look, on the surface, the religious and the irreligious live vastly different lives.** No one confuses a religious person from an irreligious pagan. **But Paul's point is that if you dig deep enough, you'll discover in both a common bedrock of legalism.** A shared foundation.
 - That explains why Paul warns these Gentiles that they're on the verge of turning back to their former idolatry – by becoming more devoted to God's Law! As they embrace more laws and adopt more rules, they're activating that same legalistic mindset that used to dominate their former paganism.

- ❖ **No one would object to describing an immoral, irreligious, idol worshipper as being enslaved to sin.** We all agree that he can't please God in that state. No matter how many good deeds he performs or good intentions he possesses.
 - But the point is that the same would apply to the person who gets religious. Who is strict about avoiding sinful behavior and following closely to God's laws. **What we have a harder time recognizing is the captive state of someone who carefully tries to follow the rules and be a good person.** But how else are we to understand Paul?
 - Is he not warning these Gentile believers that if they submit to the Law, they're essentially turning back to their former idolatry? They're re-enslaving themselves. Falling captive once more.

- ❖ Think about it more carefully. **If you're a pagan – if you worship idols – then your main concern is to figure out how to please the gods.** Maybe you have to say the right incantations. Or perform the right rituals. Or offer the right sacrifices. And if you do it right, you can turn the hands of the gods. You can make whatever god you worship to work on your behalf. **The key is – you are doing something to make it work.**
 - But do you see how that's the same mindset shared by the religious person? Religion tells you that you have to do something to secure God's blessing or power in your life. So we perform our spiritual practices – we pray; we read the Bible; we go to church; we tithe; we serve. But we're still essentially relying on the right incantations, the right rituals, and the right sacrifices of our time and service.

- ❖ **This is basically the horseshoe theory applied to paganism and legalism.** The further you move away from gospel-centeredness – whether you're moving to the extreme of paganism or the opposite extreme of legalism – it becomes more apparent, as you move along the horseshoe to the extremes, that they're closer to each other than you might've thought.
 - **In the end, the religious and the irreligious are building their lives on a common bedrock.** Relying on their works in order to make God or the gods work for them. So if these Gentile Galatians start to rely on the Law of God like the Jews, then Paul says they will have moved so far along that horseshoe that they would be in a state that's virtually no different than their former idolatry. It's like they turned back. They've left the center. **They've abandoned the gospel. That's what deeply concerns Paul.** That's why he says, in v11, that he fears he may have labored over them in vain.

- ❖ But that's why Paul points to the center and reminds his readers of the gospel of grace. Look back at v9, "*But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again...*" **In other words, how can you turn your back on a gracious God who took the initiative to seek you and find you in your lost state?**
 - Human religion is about you trying to find God. Gospel faith is about God finding you. **At the heart of religion are your efforts to know God. While at the heart of the gospel is simply being known by God.** A Christian is someone who comes to understand and to place their hope in the belief that God has been seeking you since the foundation of the world. That he chose you to be adopted to himself as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:4-5). Whom he put forward as a propitiation – to satisfy his justice and wrath by the shedding of blood (Rom 3:25). **A Christian doesn't rely on his or her efforts – but on grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone.**

- ❖ Perhaps this is the good news some of you need to hear. **Some of you feel like you're not there yet in your search for God. Because there's still so much you don't know.** You don't know all of his commands. You haven't read enough of the Bible. So how would you know if you can live up to all of his expectations? Perhaps that's why you hesitate to give your life over to Jesus – to put all your trust in him.
 - **But what if the good news is that you don't have to live up to his expectations before God knows you and sets his love upon you?** What if he loved you first and sent his Son to live the life you should've lived. Living up to those expectations *for you*. Freely giving you the gift of his righteousness. So that you, a sinner, having put on the righteousness of Christ can be justified in God's eyes by faith alone. (3:25, 27). That's the gospel of grace at the center of Paul's preaching of.

- ❖ And perhaps some of you would say you've already put your trust in Jesus. You already prayed for him to be your personal Savior. You're already a Christian. I'm sure the Galatians would've said the same. But as Paul issued a genuine warning because some were genuinely on the verge of abandoning the gospel – perhaps you need to take the same warning to heart.
 - **Could it be that you've chosen the path of religion – but you have yet to experience true gospel freedom?** Could it be that you're carrying around a prisoner's mindset? A slave mentality. You're still trying to earn your freedom. You're still relying on your efforts to work off your debt.

- ❖ **In some ways, it's more advantageous to be a pagan.** To be irreligious. Because then, at least, you know you're far from God. You're not fooling yourself or anyone else. It's obvious. **But it's much harder to detect if you're a legalist.** Because on the surface, you could look like a Christian who enjoys true gospel freedom. But if you're willing to look deep enough, you just might discover those chains of legalism, keeping you enslaved to sin.
 - You need to turn back to the gospel. To the good news that God gives his Spirit – not by works of the law – but by hearing with faith (3:2). **All it takes is hearing the gospel and believing it, and the promised Spirit will change your heart at the very core.** Breaking those chains. Granting you true gospel freedom.

- ❖ **You know you're a Christian – that you have true gospel freedom – when you're trying to be good and trying to live a good life. Not to be accepted by God. But because you're enjoying his acceptance.** Not to finally get to know him. But because you're already known by him. That's the difference between a slave still trying to work off his debt and a son enjoying his Father's love and acceptance. That's the difference between mere human religion and true gospel freedom.

Entreating You to Love as Those Truly Free in Christ

- ❖ So we've seen how this text exposes the bedrock of legalism in our human nature. But if we keep reading in vv12-20, we see how this text entreats us to love one another as those truly free in Christ. This is where Paul gets vulnerable with his readers and appeals to their personal relationship. And says he's perplexed that things have so quickly changed.
 - If you look at v12, you see the first imperative in this letter. The first command he issues to his readers. "*Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.*" That's his command. To become as he is – just as he became as they are.
 - **When Paul, a Jewish Christian, arrived in their region, he put aside his Jewish customs so as not to confuse the sufficiency of Christ alone for our salvation.** If the very one who brought you the gospel has become like you – as one who does not live according to the ceremonial aspects of the Law – then it makes no sense to act like Jews and submit under the Law.
- ❖ Paul goes on to explain that those rival teachers trying to get you to adopt Jewish law and customs – they don't really love you. Sure, they may come across like they're trying to help. To fill in what they accuse Paul of leaving out of the gospel. They claim to be laboring for you – to make much of you. **But in the end, they're only zealous for you because they need you. They need your approval of them and their ministry.**
 - Look at v17, "*They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.*" These false teachers use social exclusion (shutting you out) as a means to incite in you a zeal to be included in their exclusive group. It's a psychologically powerful way to manipulate people. **And that's Paul's point. They're not loving you. They're manipulating you.**
 - That's because these teachers are enslaved by the very legalism they're peddling. **The man who teaches you to rely on your works (your performance) is himself relying on his own performance as a minister.** He's enslaved to his performance as a preacher of his so-called gospel. He needs you to make much of him. He needs your flattery. He needs your applause. **Because, in his mind, his standing before God depends on you and your response to his teaching.**
- ❖ But if that's the case – if that's what's motivating him – that's not love. No matter how kind he is to you. No matter how much he flatters you and makes much of you. That's not love. That's not how you love someone. You don't make much of someone just to get something out of them. That's not the right purpose or the "*good purpose*" that Paul refers to in v18

- ❖ **The good purpose for making much of someone – for loving them – is simply because you want to do them good.** Even if you don't get anything out of it. Or if it's at your expense. Paul reminds the Galatians that that's exactly how they loved him when he was first with them in person.
 - Look back at v13. He reminds them of the "*bodily ailment*" that led Paul to be delayed in this region of Galatia. He couldn't move on in his missionary journey. But that unexpected delay resulted in fruitful ministry.

- ❖ Now no one knows what his bodily ailment was. But whatever it was, it was debilitating enough for his condition to be described in v14 as a "*trial*" for the Galatians. Meaning it must have been challenging to care for him in his weakness.
 - But they did not scorn him or despise him. The word for "despise" literally means to spit out. **He's saying he's grateful they didn't spit on him.** Which you might think would be super rude and rather extreme if they did. **But you have to understand that, in ancient Greco-Roman culture, people were generally cruel towards the feeble and disabled.** It was common to spit on those with visible infirmities or disabilities as a means of warding off evil spirits. But the Galatians didn't do that. They didn't treat Paul like he was demon possessed. They treated him like he was an angel. Like he was Jesus himself.
 - Paul recalls, in v15, how they showed him so much love that they were willing to gouge their eyes out for him! Which is not meant to be taken literally. It was just an idiom to express how much they cared for him.

- ❖ So what happened to them? **Considering the depths of their prior friendship, Paul is perplexed that they're treating him like an enemy now.** Rejecting the gospel he preached to them and entertaining the legalism of his rivals and their false gospel.
 - He goes on to say in v19 that he is, "*again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*" He's comparing himself to a mother who has already given birth to her baby. But now it's like he has to endure the pain and anguish of labor all over again. He feels like he has to start all over in explaining them the gospel.

- ❖ He wants them to turn back. Not to their former enslavement. But to turn back to their former love for him. And that'll only happen by soaking in the truth of the gospel that he first taught them. He wants them to love as those who are truly free in Christ.
 - **It's only when you're free in Christ – when you're secure in his acceptance – only then can you love others with true benevolence.** Not trying to manipulate them. Not trying to get them to turn around and make much of you.
 - When you're secure in the love of Christ – secure in his gospel – then you're free to truly love others with only their good and God's glory in mind.

- ❖ Friends, are you truly free to love each other in this way? **Are you free to love each other and make much of each other – without self-interest?** Without trying to get something in return? Or are you still enslaved and not experiencing true gospel freedom?

- ❖ **Lovers** can be enslaved – not free to truly love and be loved because they’re so needy of the other’s affection. **Parents**, can be enslaved – not free to truly love their children because they’re seeking validation as a good parent, which depends on the outcome of their parenting. On the success of their children.
 - **Children**, can likewise be enslaved – not free to truly love and enjoy the love of their parents because they’re constantly in need of mom and dad’s approval. Even into adulthood. **Fellow church members** can be enslaved – not free to truly love another because they’re insecure in their own acceptance. They feel pressured to put on a face while at church – to present as a good Christian.

- ❖ Friends, imprisonment is ultimately a mindset you need to shake. **You can go about your days, living your life, with no chains restraining you or bars confining you – but still be enslaved.** Carrying your captivity with you in your mind and in your heart. Constantly chasing after acceptance and approval; affection and validation. Never truly knowing love or knowing how to love – until you receive God’s love. I entreat you to rest in the love of Christ and to love as those truly free in him.