“Freedom from Bondage”

Galatians 4:8-20

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Introduction:

The salvation we have received through Jesus Christ is a gift of grace. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and not that of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast,” Ephesians 2:8-9. No matter our status or how hard we work this gift of grace could never be earned. It was an outpouring of the love of God on those who would seek Him through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

No man can take credit for their own salvation. No works of the flesh or the law can earn one’s way into the favor of God. Jesus very plainly spoke, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me,” (John 14:6). The door to salvation has been opened to all who will believe and
walk through, coming to the Father by way of the Son (see also Ephesians 2:18).

Today’s lesson picks up where last week’s left off and the same issue is still being dealt with. The Judaizers were still attempting to overthrow Paul’s teaching of the gospel to the church at Galatia by insisting that works of the flesh and the law be added. In their thinking, grace found in Jesus’ saving sacrifice was not enough. There had to be additional elements to make one worthy of being a child of God; to make one acceptable in the eyes of God.

But even in the gospels, we see John the Baptist declared, “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,” (John 1:16-17).

Early on in Jesus’ earthly ministry, we see grace coming to the forefront. This grace is accepted with a believing heart and “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us . . .” (Titus 3:5; read Titus 3:4-9).

Paul’s continuing plea in this portion of the book of Galatians is to get the people back to where they once believed; to the point where they first accepted the gospel in faith before the false teachers tried to undermine the truth and corrupt their believing hearts.
Galatians 4:8-11 “Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

In last week’s lesson, Paul’s teaching left off with the declaration of the believer’s status as being, “a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ,” (Galatians 4:7). After such a promise of their relationship with God through Christ, why do they now seek to substitute or replace their newfound faith with “weak and beggarly elements?” Why do they “desire again to be in bondage?”

A relationship in Christ equals freedom. For the Gentiles, their life before Christ was spent serving “them which by nature are no gods,” (compare Isaiah 37:19). They served, worshiped, and adhered to rituals and practices that kept them in fear and bondage to a false deity. Do they now want to give up their adoption in the true God to go back to that which is false? Because if any one of them thinks that by adding rituals of the law brings them closer to God, they are sadly mistaken. It’s as if their life hasn’t been changed at all. In their fleshly desire to control their path of salvation, they are still seeking to
be enslaved. This time not by false gods as in times past, but by laws exposed to them by false teachers, the Judaizers, that don’t apply to a new creature in Christ.

Right now, they know God, “or rather are known of God.” Right now they are recognized as sons of God; as children of God. Right now they have a personal relationship with God. Right now they have salvation through Christ alone and His work on the cross. Why are they looking to return from where they are right now to things that don’t profit and will actually hinder their growth in their relationship with God? Titus 3:9 teaches, “Avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.” Their right now faith should be in Jesus Christ and Him alone and there it should stay!

The Apostle Paul knows that our relationship with God through Christ is the most precious thing a person can experience. He states, “I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.” He fears their following and giving attention to these false teachers will lead them away from the gospel from which he first labored among them. He fears them getting entangled with the unprofitable. He fears them walking out on the greatest thing they could ever hope to know. He has worked among them to express the love of God through Christ for their souls, yet they are so soon taken away
from that very truth in his absence. Thus he states, “I am afraid of you . . .”

Once they have found their freedom in Christ are they now convinced by these outsiders of the faith that they too need rituals? Are they now caught up in the observances of “days, and months, and times, and years?” The traditions of men and the following thereof are not found in Christ (see Colossians 2:8, 20). Why be bound by ordinances and observances? Why do they want to be enslaved again after being made free? They don’t need to do anything to help the work of the Cross. Christ did it all by Himself and in Him we are free!

Galatians 4:12-16 “Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as you are: ye have not injured me at all. Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”

The love relationship between this apostle and the churches he establishes is very real and very touching. He
wants nothing more than to see them rooted and growing in their newfound faith in Christ (see Galatians 2:16).

Expressing his love for them, Paul addresses them as “brethren;” as ones in the shared community of faith; family of God; sons, and heirs of the promise. And, in that spirit of love, rather than command, he urged them saying, “I beseech you,” with a pleading heart for them to consider the path they are choosing to follow.

“Be as I am . . .” Before Paul’s life was changed on that day on the road to Damascus he was known as Saul. Before Jesus met him there and shined on his life a new mission, he was a persecutor. Before grace met him in the midst of his sin, he was bound by the law. At one point Paul told of his background enveloped in legalism and trusting in works of the flesh, saying, “Though I might have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touch the righteousness which is in the law, blameless,” (Philippians 3:4-6). According to the law, Paul had all the right marks checked off his list.

Yet, when Christ changed his life all that previous stuff was counted as “loss for Christ,” (Philippians 3:7). His life now was
marked by faith and grace. He wrote to the Corinthian church, “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me,” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Now, he encourages those in Galatia to let their walk of faith be molded by the grace of God and not by the bondage of the law wherewith they have been made free, as his life now demonstrates. He wants their life to be marked by the power Christ living on the inside and not by outward symbols and empty rituals.

Paul identified himself with his Christian brethren saying, “For I am as ye are.” One of Paul’s most powerful ways of reaching people was to go where they are and become as they were. He said, “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some,” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). In all of this, he wasn’t worried about maintaining a high-minded position. He wasn’t worried about incurring numbers of followers for himself. For the love of God,
he wanted to reach souls and draw them near to Him; to Jesus. Paul came to them as a brother; as one and the same, sharers in the great gospel of truth.

And, when he came to them in love, they responded in love. It was a point in Paul’s life when he was dealing with an “infirmity of the flesh.” Something in Paul’s physical well-being seemed to plague him. No one knows for sure what the illness or malady was, yet it was something he greatly struggled with. Due to the language of verse 15 in our lesson, some suppose his infirmity revolved around his eyesight, for there we read of him saying, “For I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.”

Not only does that tell a hint of the physical struggle he may have been dealing with, but it also speaks volumes of the love he felt expressed to himself by those in Galatia. When he “first” came to them and “preached the gospel” they “received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus,” he said. His infirmity may have been a problem for him but through it all, God still enables him to reach souls in Galatia for the Kingdom’s sake. When they met Paul and saw him, they respected him as a messenger of God carrying the treasure of God’s Word.

But now, the infectious teachings of the Judaizers and false ways have planted diseased seeds of confusion and
discord that not only strips away at the gospel which Paul taught them but attacked the very character of Paul himself. That original love and respect those at Galatia had for Paul seem to have been also thwarted by those false, contentious teachers for he writes, “Where is then the blessedness ye spake of . . . am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”

Did not Jesus teach that it is the truth that will set you free (John 8:32) and that he who has the Son experiences freedom (John 8:36)? The Good News, the gospel message Paul brought to them was the truth of the Son of God who sets men free. Now they willingly subject themselves to carriers of lies and consider the one who loved them enough to labor among them, in spite of his infirmity, as an enemy.

Truth tellers more often than not will find themselves on the end of the no favorability path. The Bible tells us, “They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly,” (Amos 5:10). Previously I wrote:

“Silence is a killer of a nation. Silence allows things to go unchallenged. Silence gives people permission to carry on as is without regard to consequence. Consequences that not only the individual involved must experience, but also how it seeps into the very fabric of our culture staining it forevermore. . .
No matter what the world may be doing, you and I must keep doing what is right. There is an absolute Truth! He is God! Everything that is right begins and ends with Him. So, when we stand for truth, we stand for Him and I can’t think of a better place to be.” (Stand for Truth!).

Yet, out of love, Paul told them the truth for their soul’s sake. If they choose to follow Paul’s teaching, the truth, then their hearts will be moved into the abundant life that Jesus so desperately wanted for people that He died for them to obtain it through Him. But, if they decide to follow the path of the false teachers they will be robbed of that freedom in Christ and be bound once again to the lesser things of this world and miss out on the glories that lay up ahead.

Galatians 4:17-20 “They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them. But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.”

Paul’s last phrase of this lesson, “For I stand in doubt of you” speaks volumes of how he believes their faith has been affected by those false teachers. As a spiritual father to those in the church of Galatia he sees not only the mess in the false
messengers that would destroy their freedom in Christ, but he sees their motives behind the scenes.

The men that came and swayed those in the church of Galatia did so not for the purpose of the people’s eternal benefit or to draw them closer to God, but for their own purposes. They wished to rack up the number of followers to themselves that they might be able to influence them. Most of us can identify with the concept of numbers and followers through the use of modern day social media.

Therefore, “zealously;” with persuasive enthusiasm and great energy, they drove home their message, advocating the ways of the laws over the way of grace and freedom found in Christ, and in the process “exclude” the people of Galatia from the true promises Paul taught them that is found in the Gospel; found in Christ alone.

If it was a “good thing” they were being “zealously affected” for, Paul wouldn’t need to address them in such a way. He would actually commend them for the good they follow even in his absence. But, this was not good and caused great distress for the Apostle Paul in viewing not only their relationship with him but their relationship with God through Christ.

Therefore, willingly, as any good leader would hopefully do, Paul decided to continue to put forth the labor to see these
lives in Galatia transformed; “until Christ be formed in you.” Using the language of giving birth, he stated I would go through it all again just to see your life come under the power of God’s grace through Christ. Whatever he suffered in the process of bringing the true gospel to them the first time, he was willing to do it all again that his spiritual “children” might have that life in Christ that the promise of the gospel speaks of. Sometimes it’s hard persevering with people, but Paul said I will do it all again for your sakes. That’s love. That’s true leadership.

His “desire” was to be where they are, no doubt to further instruct them and lead them. In natural parenting, there are different stages our little ones go through. In each stage brings with it learning with a lot of mistakes, be it walking, talking, learning to use the potty, driving (yikes!) and so forth. As parents, we pick them up, dust them off, help them through the mistake, and show them once again the right way to do it. In the spiritual, I can almost sense Paul wanting to take the same loving approach to those in the Galatian church.

Hopefully then, if he could be where they are, help them through the mistake of following false teachers, and further instruct them, and travail with them again, perhaps he can change from the harshness of rebuke this letter brings to the loving relationship he once knew with them as he could envision them restored back to their faith and maturing in
Christ. But, for right now, he states, “I stand in doubt of you.” No true leader wants to quote that phrase over those who are or have followed them.

Conclusion:

“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed,” (John 8:36). A relationship in Christ equals freedom. To drive this point further home, Paul, in Galatians 4:19-31 (suggested reading not found in today’s text), explains the difference between works of the flesh and the work of grace through promise using the two sons born to Abraham as a backdrop. Concluding this chapter, he states, “We are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free,” (Galatians 4:31).