

Galatians: Liberty, Unity, and Sanctity in Christ

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Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, through your Son you overcame death and opened to us the way of liberty and eternity. Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts with the presence of your Spirit, that your words might resound in us and from us, all through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Background

“Give me liberty or give me death!”
“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Nobody said it better than Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson about the American longing for liberty. But this freedom cry is really the heart’s cry of all people. And in fact, when we read the Bible, we see that freedom is also God’s heart’s cry for his children.

- In Exodus, God instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh—let my people go!
- Freedom was the theme of Jesus’ message at the very get-go of his public ministry: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim release to the captives ... and to let the oppressed go free.
- Freedom is a major theme in Paul’s letter to the Galatians as well. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” writes Paul.

Galatians has been described as the Christian Magna Carta.

There are two common responses to freedom: excitement and fear.

- Freedom is an exciting thing for some. There are those who, in their excitement about freedom, entirely do away with the law and go hog wild.
- But for others on the opposite extreme, freedom is a scary thing that seems just too expansive, too available, too easily abused. Fearful of their newfound freedom, some pull back into the familiarity and certainty of laws, rules, and regulations.

Paul’s churches in Turkey struggled with striking a balance between these two extremes.

“You foolish Galatians!” says Paul, “Who has bewitched you?... I’m astonished you’ve so quickly turned to another gospel. ... Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you’ve heard?”

Paul’s perturbed. Perturbed at his opponents who have attacked his credibility and maligned his character. He’s peeved that the Galatians have “drunk the kool-aid” and listened to this legalistic group that said Paul was wrong and faith in Christ was not enough. Paul’s “put out” that the

Galatians bought the lie that you need human effort—lots of it, to be accepted, to be legitimate in God's sight and the sight of others.

To correct this, Paul takes the Galatians—and us—back to school for a crash-course review of Christ's Freedom 101 class. Here are some of the CliffsNotes from Galatians:

- Believe the good news! The just live by faith.
- Look to the Lord for life, not the law.
- The law is good, but incapable of imparting grace.
- Rely not on yourself or your efforts—rely upon the Holy Spirit.
- This isn't about you and your credentials and achievements and your score cards and straight A's and resumes and good deeds to make you feel good about yourself. That's hogwash.
- We all fail and fall short of God's glory—no matter how hard we strain and flail.
- In Christ alone you make the grade and hit the mark.
- If you boast—boast in the cross of Christ.
- In Christ you are free. But Christ's freedom isn't a free-for all.
- In Christ's liberty, you're paradoxically BOUND and FREE.
- You're free—free FROM a self-serving existence.
- You're free—free TO serve Christ.
- Free to be servants of one another.
- Set free to bear one another's burdens.
- Free to work for the good of all.
- Free to love your neighbor as yourself.

Or as Paul says, "THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS is FAITH working itself through LOVE."

To be truly free is a God-thing, where we:

- RECEIVE the free gift of the SPIRIT.
- Open this gift and LIVE by the SPIRIT.
- We're LED by the SPIRIT and GUIDED by the SPIRIT.
- We're free to SOW, not the seeds of sin, but SOW the seeds of the SPIRIT.
- And, we're guaranteed a bumper crop of the FRUIT of the SPIRIT—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

There is no law against such things, says Paul.

Let's hear now from:

Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Galatians: Liberty, Unity, and Sanctity in Christ

Seculosity. Contrary to news reports, religion is not declining in America. It's at an all-time high. Our society is ceaselessly consumed with and ever consuming religion, around the clock. This rival religion is rooted in the secular sacraments of: career, parenting, busyness, technology, politics, food, perfection, athletics, money, and romance.

Today's replacement, religiosity, isn't being practiced and professed in churches so much as in the marketplace, neighborhoods, schools, sporting events, and in the glow of our screens.

Seculosity is the abundance of and addiction to doing doing doing, or what Christians call works. We're fast and furious about performing, producing, purchasing, proving, earning, climbing, appearing, and arriving. And we're fried and fed up. We need some help from above to liberate ourselves from the incessant burden to prove to God and the world our worthiness. We are the Galatians all over again, putting our unique 21st century American spin on it.

"Now that faith has come," Paul tells us, "we can stop your self-induced striving and scurrying to prove we're good enough." God is more than enough. What we need is a healthy and balanced relationship between Christ, the law, and our deeds.

Paul uses an example from the culture of his day to help. He likens the law to a paidagogos (translated as a "disciplinarian" in our passage). A paidagogos (not to be confused with Lady Gaga) was an old, trusted slave who the family knew well over the years. The paidagogos was similar to an au pair or nanny or babysitter today. I think of someone like Alice from the Brady Bunch. I loved Alice. The paidagogos was assigned to protect and guard the minor. Walked them to and from school each day. They taught the child proper manners and enforced house rules.

Paul is saying, before faith and spiritual maturity came in Christ, we lived as young children—spiritual minors under the care of the law—our paidagagos, who lovingly provided adult supervision and discretion—all for our protection. And we were under house rules, needed permission slips, movie and video game ratings, screen time regulations, and curfews. Loving boundaries and guidelines to protect us from exposure to very real dangers out there—like predators, drugs, technology addiction, mature themes unsuited for children, or ... shooting your eye out or swallowing your gum.

When Christ came, this temporary and limited authority of the paidagagos came to a close. Christ took the lead now. We had matured and grown up, “come of age.” Graduated. There was no going back to the toddler and adolescent years. To return to the law would be like moving back home as an adult and needing a babysitter and someone to hold our hand as we crossed the street.

You see, the problem with the Galatians wasn’t with the law. The problem was their relationship to the law. They idolized the law and put it on a pedestal—they wanted to go back to the good old days when the paidagagos told them everything to do. They didn’t have to think or make adult decisions. Or trust. It was all black and white and spelled out for them. They didn’t have to trust in ... Jesus. And Paul was very disturbed by this reversion to childish behavior.

Everything changed when faith came. Everything.

Life can be understood before Christ and after Christ and most importantly, in Christ. Being baptized in Christ means that our lordship is transferred to Christ Jesus. The law isn’t lord and we aren’t lord of our lives anymore. Our paidagagos is no longer the final say. Jesus is. Being “in Christ” means that our identity is forever bound up with Christ’s identity—dying with him, rising with him, following him, carrying our cross, and being sent by Jesus to continue his works.

Paul says you are to “put on” Christ or be clothed with Christ like a garment. There are three ways of understanding this being clothed in Christ:

- First, in Christian baptism in the early church, believers—no matter if they were male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, young or old, were always given a white robe at their baptism. We’re all clothed with the white, pure robe of Christ—no matter who we are.
- Second, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood at that time involved what’s called the toga virilis—where a child would don this traditional robe as a sign of maturity, of coming of age. Paul is saying, in Christ we have moved beyond spiritual infancy, to spiritual maturity in Christ. Christ is our toga virilis.
- Third, the imagery of “putting on” Christ related to theater at that time. Accomplished actors were able to immerse themselves in the part they were playing. A good actor could transform their personality, throw themselves into the part, even channel and become the character.

I think of Daniel Day Lewis when he was Lincoln. Or Gary Oldman who played Winston Churchill in Darkest Hour. In their Academy award winning performances—they weren’t just play-acting; they became Lincoln and Churchill.

And so when we put on Christ, we enact his life. We’re little Christs. Not only that, by the power of the Spirit—Christ acts through us! When we’re “out of ourselves” and “in Christ,” Christ levels the

playing field. We all need Christ—everyone. Christ also levels the barriers that formally divided us from one another: sex, social status, citizenship, or civilization. Jesus doesn't eliminate our differences; he just makes our distinctives no longer divisive or defining. Jesus transforms our barricades into bridges—transcending our politics, theologies, and sexual orientation. And here is exactly why the law is insufficient for salvation. Misuse and abuse of the law can lead us to divide and demean and categorize and judge.

Let me give you two examples.

- There was an ancient Jewish morning prayer, that a Jewish man could offer to God:
I thank you O Lord, Creator of the Universe, that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

And then Socrates, who was not Jewish, but a Greek who said something strikingly similar, that he was grateful to Fortune for these three things:

- That I was born a human being and not one of the brutes.
- That I was born a man and not a woman
- That I was a born a Greek and not a barbarian.

Legalism and religion can become an instrument to label us good and those different from us bad. The law becomes a tool to control others and to control God. Let me just say, Galatians blows that bad idea out of the water. Listen to Paul's radical words in our passage:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Hear the good news Immanuel: God plays no favorites. We're all equal—made in the image of the living God. And we all equally need forgiveness and grace. You are free—you no longer have to strut and fret your hour upon the stage to earn God's attention and acceptance by what you DO. Instead, by faith accept God's acceptance by accepting what's been DONE by Christ for you.

There are only two letters difference between DO and DONE, but these two words are worlds apart. Faith in Christ does something the law could never do—it unlocks and unleashes the Spirit's energy to do God's will in us.

- In Christ we have neither a superiority complex or an inferiority complex. We don't have self-esteem, we have God-esteem.
- In Christ, our differences are integrated.
- In Christ, our differences enhance our unity.
- In Christ, our differences enrich our interdependence upon one another.
- In Christ, our differences no longer divide, barricade, or fuel our pride.
- We don't have to be embarrassed or ashamed of our sexual identity, how wealthy we are, or what the particular tone of our color of skin is.
- We can be who we are in Christ Jesus—people of faith, children of God, children of the promise, heirs of Abraham, in God's family, by grace.

Be at peace—we belong to God and we belong to one another in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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