

WHAT MATTERS MOST

As I shared last week, the story of Galatians is pulling us toward a very particular issue facing the Galatian Christians at their moment in history. A question of how to understand and respond to the story of God through Jesus. Having some context for that issue helps us better understand the story in the text, and also see the parallels in our own moment in history.

In regards to Galatians as a whole, we have seen so far in our journey that freedom is fundamental to our humanity. That to be fully human requires freedom, though the necessity of freedom does not mean it is inevitable. Instead of the universal experience of freedom, we universally experience enslavement, entrapment, confinement, oppression, and ultimately destruction under the yoke of sin—our own and the evil of this and every age. Freedom must be won, must be won for us, received, and diligently guarded.

What matters most to Paul is that the Galatians do not forgo their freedom in Jesus, this essential truth of the faith they claim. **For Paul, what matters most, is that Jesus changes everything**, the revelation of Jesus orients history, including our own stories, into stories of rescue, stories of freedom. And this essential truth—the freedom given us by the person (life, teachings, miracles, interactions, etc.) of Jesus and the work (death on the cross and resurrection from the grave) be kept first in our vision/view of the life of faith; of what faith in real, everyday life looks like.

THE DIFFERENCE OF WHAT IS FIRST

It is one thing to acknowledge, even fervently so, this essential truth, but it is another to make living out truth as our daily objective. We say we want a free life, but what we really want—what holds our day to day attention—is a life of prosperity, life of success, life of security, or even a religious life, a righteousness life, or spiritual life, rather than a life of truth. The irony is, that if our objective is to live truthfully, **to experience the freedom of Christ in every detail of daily living**, we will have more than we can fathom, attaining the other things we wish for—though their manifestation might be different than what we imagine.

Let me paraphrase Paul by paraphrasing the poet, playwright, and lawyer, Archibald MacLeish,

“It makes a great deal of difference...whether you put the truth of the gospel in the first place or the second. It makes a great deal of difference whether you say that your objective is a life free in Christ but

that you wish first to be prosperous, or first to be comfortable or first to be something else, or whether you say that your objective is a life free in Christ.”¹

If the truth that freedom is essential to our humanity and that, fundamentally, freedom is won for us, gifted us by Jesus, if this truth is supplanted by anything else, what we get is not freedom but enslavement, imprisonment to whatever else we put first, even if the replacement is an acknowledged good thing. Whether the supplanter be traditions, morality, wants, feelings, needs, comfort, prosperity, unfettered existence, religion, etc., whatever comes first, shapes all that follows.

Here is what we know, God’s acting upon us comes first, and his action is deliverance from sin and the evil of this age, rescue from slavery and bondage. Because this is truth, what follows should be a life lived,

‘...zestfully, exploring every experience—pain and joy, enigma and insight, fulfillment and frustration—as **a dimension of human freedom, searching through each for a sense of grace.** If we get our information from the biblical material...’²

...the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, Samson, Deborah, Daniel, Ruth, Peter, Mary of Magdala, and the like—we know that even our stories are indeed salvation stories, God’s Story through our past, in our present, and unfolding into our future. In the assurance of such truth, what other description of life would suit us Christians than to say our life is free and light?

But is that how the world sees the church or even Jesus followers? Would they describe us as zestful in exploring the dimension of human freedom, searching through each for a sense of grace? Would they describe our existence and interactions with one another and themselves as free and light?

Probably not. But why? Certainly outside circumstances, the “evil age” from which we have been delivered could be a contributing factor, and Paul will address that at the end of the letter. But perhaps **the dissonance between what a life of freedom in Jesus is meant to be and what it appears to be might actually come from inside.** Could it be, as Eugene Peterson so aptly noted, that while,

‘We might fairly suppose that a congregation of Christians, well stocked with freedom stories...would not for a moment [put up with] any teaching that would suppress freedom. We might reasonably expect that a group of people who from infancy have been told stories of Jesus setting people free and who keep this Jesus at the center of their attention in weekly worship, would be sensitive to any encroachment on their freedom...[The fact is, however, the] community of faith, the very place we are most likely to experience the free life, is also the very place where we are in most danger of losing it.’³

¹ Archibald MacLeish, “The Conquest of America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1980, p. 42, quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, p. 198.

² Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

Now I am sure you wouldn't expect to hear that from a pastor. To warn you about the very thing that I am commissioned to lead, the very organism that takes so much of my time, mind, and heart. But, remember what we said a couple of weeks ago, where two or three are gathered together in the name of God, a committee is formed, and an idol is raised. We "god people" are must adept at supplanting what is of first importance—that free life given us by Jesus to live freely and fully in the ever-continuing story of salvation through our daily existence. **And we do so with unvetted, lifeless ideas, ideals, and idols of what life with God requires, crafted by our hands and not shaped for us in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.**

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN GALATIANS

Here is Galatians 2, Paul is fighting for freedom not against the outside world, the culture in which we swim, but rather, look at verse 4 with me, those "false brothers—pretend family—secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus so that they might bring us into slavery—"

They are a sneaky bunch, these spies from within. They are intentional in their actions and crafty in their maneuvers. In the Galatian's particular case, it is those "social" and "elite Judaizers," that we talked about two weeks ago, who are infiltrating and ensnaring the fledgling Gentile Jesus followers, insisting that there is something more than the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus necessary to mature, to receive the full and continuing benefits of being God's people. For the Judaizers, this "more," was to become Jews through the ceremonial traditions (summed up as circumcision) and keeping of the Mosaic Law. In other words, there were certain conditions required for a faithful life: certain behaviors, beliefs, practices, customs, etc., that ensured purity and clearly defined one's position with God's lineage.

Judaizers (like the Jews in John 8) believed they were free, so there was no need for them to be freed by someone else. The fulfillment of the promise that they hoped for was still contingent on them and their adherence to their religion. So, they sought to live Jewish—traditional, moral, culturally exclusive lives (v. 11-14). By doing so, they set conditions upon the lives of others—circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, subjection to the moral and cultural laws of Moses to name a few. These, in their mind, were the conditions necessary to attain the fullness of the covenant, to remain in an effective relationship with God until salvation was complete. It was good enough to start with Jesus, to recognize God's love through Jesus, but more was needed if we really wanted to be a child of God.

This claim is what made Paul's mention of his non-Jewish friend Titus, in verse 3 and the fact that Titus did not receive the condition necessary to become a Jew, circumcision, so crucial in the history of our faith. The Jewish leadership of the church of Jerusalem said that it was enough for Titus to submit to the yoke of Jesus and nothing more. Jesus, Titus' following in faith Jesus, made Titus a child of our Father, not the conditions set by the Judaizers.

Now, what made these spies so sneaky, why Paul and the early church were so ardent in their opposition to them—and why Jesus was aggressive with the same group in his life—was that the conditions they created...traditions and morality and cultural exclusivity...were not unimportant, some strange or out-there notion of the spiritual life, some whacky or cooky or even unclear set of beliefs and behaviors; no, they were

perfectly reasonable, well ordered, with historical evidence to their validity. After all, these were the devout, the people who could trace their story back to the beginning of all stories, who had fought for their distinction through millennia of opposition. “Conscious of being a people set apart called out for a special purpose in human history, the Jews knew that dissolving barriers that separated them from the rest of the world could defeat that purpose.”⁴ So when they hear of non-Jewish people becoming apprentices to a Jewish rabbi’s life and teaching, they know they better act quickly to ensure what they had fought hard for be kept pure—for God’s sake mind you.

But here is the thing, no matter how important their traditions and worthy their morals and useful their cultural exclusivity in safeguarding “the Promise,”⁵; they were not the most important thing; the focus of their objective, the day-to-day vision to keep their eyes steadily locked upon. They had said yes to freedom but first wanted to keep their sacred traditions and conditional morals and cultural distinctions. The difference is subtle, but the implications can be disastrous as we’ll soon find out.

The Judaizers put conditions on being included in the family of God, not just entry but remaining a member as if a child cannot be a child until he or she does certain customs or only remains a child when he or she keeps to specific rules. But such an idea is opposed to Jesus’ summation story of the prodigal and his older brother, both of who were heirs despite their shortcomings in obedience and neglect of commitments.

According to the Jerusalem council, as we have detailed for us in Acts 15 and summarized here in the first ten verses of Galatians, **being free in Christ is first, and then remembering the poor—choosing to use our freedom for the sake of others, is second.** Traditions, morality, and cultural distinction don’t make the top two. They have a place but cannot be our “first love” (Rev. 2:4) or even second. Paul will make sure they find their proper place later in the letter, for we cannot live without order (traditions), we cannot live without morals (individually or communally), and there is a distinction in a life lived by the Spirit and one lived for the flesh; **but the fight has to be first for what is first...and what is first is the freedom won for us, gifted us, in Jesus, and the objective to live into that freedom.**

Because what is first is freedom—specifically the essential and delivered freedom, or what Paul calls the gospel—we can resist the most common entanglement of our faith: conditions. Whatever those conditions might be, and in whatever ways they might be presented to us today.

We are, in a digital age, with access to any number of ointments to heal and answers to our frustration, longing, or need. What is sold in the Christian market place are the right means, methods, and morals necessary to be faithful and fruitful in life. If we get these things right, if we submit to their processes, we will eventually receive the freedom we desire, so the marketers claim. But that is not the way freedom works. Freedom has been granted to us, won for us. God acts, and we are acted upon. God saves, and we are rescued. Even while in our mothers’ wombs, we were set apart, chosen by his grace for the life of freedom, so keep your eyes fixed on the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2) as you “lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely” (Heb 12:1). That is the truth that sets us free.

⁴ Virginia Stem-Owens, *Looking For Jesus*, 127.

⁵ Chaim Potok, *The Promise*, 342.

What is marketed to us (sometimes in ignorance and sometime in arrogance) are the unvetted, lifeless ideas, ideals, and idols of what life with God requires, crafted by our hands and not shaped for us by the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The shift of perspective is subtle, and the conditions marketed convincing, moving our eyes from Jesus to traditions, morals, cultural distinctions, practices, procedures, programs, prayer chains, and the like that get for us the life we wish for rather the true life.

Don't miss this, the Judaizers of Paul's day and the marketing of our day does not get rid of Jesus—his life and work—he is just moved off the side. A life with and like Jesus—a free life—is no longer the objective; something else is—a Jewish life, a prosperous life, a secure life, a righteous life, or a spiritual life.

OUR RESPONSE

So what are we to do? How are we to respond when we recognize the spies for who they are and what they are seeking to take from us? We resist, as Paul says in verse 5,

“to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.”

We resist so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved, the truth that God acted, and you are free, that he is here, he is on your side, and he will finish what he has started. Only in such a clearly defined story can we experience freedom—freedom from sin, the evil age, and our shrunken views of a full life.

How do we resist? We have in Galatians 2:1-10 a picture of resistance that is not rebellion. Not a youthful dismissal of history or fool's preferential tantrum. The traditions, morals, and cultural distinctions of the Judaizers were old, in all the great ways! Their traditions, morals, and distinctions go back to the very beginning of the story of Scripture, **but instead of letting Jesus transform the way they look back as we saw Paul do in the retelling of his story (Gal. 1:13-24)**, the Judaizers contend for faith in a tradition rather than a person...in morals rather than a person...in cultural distinctions rather than a person...in a process, a program, a prayer...rather than a person.

Paul, while blunt on the issue, is not disrespectful of the history. Notice what he does in verse 2,

‘I went because of a revelation [the same word used in 1:12, when Paul talks about the gospel he received] and set before them [the leaders of the Jerusalem church] (**though privately** before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.’

Paul does not resist alone, nor does he do so haphazardly. Paul went to those who knew his story and whose story he knew (1:18). He went to people (the apostles) who could affirm and confirm that the gospel he lived was in line with Jesus (his life and work), the pillars of the faith who walked and talked and learned from Jesus face to face. He went to them privately, quietly so as not to make a fuss and cause more issues. He went for practical, real-world, real-people purposes, not a theological debate, which is why he took Titus. He went to confirm the truth of the gospel he had been teaching and living, and what that gospel life had produced in others. He wants to confirm that he is not missing something. Paul is not positioning, trying getting his way, it's about the gospel and grace that they have all received and share (vs. 7-9).

Paul is a Jew of Jews, he knows every bit as much, if not more, than the Judiazers the Jewish tradition, but he has seen something more, a story going on through the tradition but not bound by it. And the apostles see the same thing. What is at stake in this moment is the very freedom for which Christ has set them free, free to live by faith, because of faith, in the never-ending, never giving up, always and forever love of God for them, God with them, God on their side; without conditions.

So we resist, not rebel. We resist the pull of conditions, resist the condemnation that comes from those who choose slavery over freedom, resist the selfishness of those who would use freedom to flee the very thing they are freed to do: love. Paul's resistance is encouraged not merely in ideological affirmation but in practice. Paul was encouraged in verse 10 "do not neglect the poor," and so live consistently in the truth—with compassion and comradery with the least.

The conclusion that this early group of Jesus followers, the ones who knew him most intimately, came to was that Jesus reorients tradition and morality, even that of the Jews. Jesus allows us, and Paul implores us to resist those things and people that would have us start, continue, or finish in anything other than Jesus alive, Jesus died, Jesus alive again. And they give us how we resist: in community (confirming the gospel given us by Jesus) and by remembering the poor (acting with love towards others with empathy).

REFLECTION |

So, what is your objective, the vision that gives shape to the way you go about your life? Do you set out each day to live free in Christ, or something else?

"it makes a great deal of difference...whether you put truth in the first place of the second."

Consider this question, and the ways have you observed the difference in your life and the life of the "church" this week.

OUR SHARED PRAYER

We have prayed this prayer⁶ as an *expectation* of what the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross makes possible for us. We have prayed it as a *confession* of our individual and collective need for deliverance, to live free indeed. We have prayed this prayer *against the lies about God*, about who he is and what he is up to, that keep ourselves and our neighbors imprisoned in a less-than life. We have prayed this prayer as ones whose *lives are stories of freedom in Jesus*. We have prayed as ones who *desire to remain free in Jesus* in a way that sees Jesus finish what he started. And today, **we pray this prayer as ones who wish to live with truth in the first place, not the second.**

We join our prayers today in intercession for the men and women in our faith family, in our daily lives, and in our city who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty and debt with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs and stages of life that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families and relationships where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others, or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to any other distraction;
those who are trapped by sin, their own, and others.

O Father, whose will it is that we be free, and who did give Your Son that we might be delivered from all coercive powers;

make us examples of Your freedom,
proclaimers of Your freedom, and
instruments of Your freedom;

snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise, Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁶ Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*, 44.