

TRUE FREEDOM

Galatians 4:8-20

The idea of “freedom” is certainly appealing to most people. What freedom means to some people could be “do anything, at anytime, at anyplace without regard to the impact on anyone else and without any accountability.” A better term of that description would be anarchy. In a Biblical context, “freedom” would generally be understood as “to not be enslaved” but would not include a license to do things that would harm others. When people do things that harm others, then the society generally will take action to limit the “freedom” of the person responsible for the harm.

We even limit ourselves with assumed barriers and self-imposed limitations that are really not there. How many times have we backed off doing something someone told us that we might enjoy by telling ourselves, “I’m too old for that?”

In our spiritual growth we can find many things that inhibit our development and prevent us from growing. We find forces all around us that would mold us to a certain “size and shape.” In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he wrote, “Do not be conformed to the world . . .” J. B. Phillips in his translation of the Bible wrote that admonition from Paul as, “Don’t let the world force you into its mold . . .” Whether you are molding clay or molding plastic, the mold predetermines how far the material can go and what shape it will take. Traditions, customs and preconceived ideas do the same thing to our lives. Traditions, customs and preconceived ideas are especially powerful when they are incorporated into the “laws” by which a society lives. The “laws” can be codified into legal documents, they can be passed on from parent to child as traditions in the family, or they can be superstitions that we learn from friends and family. Such “laws” bind us and inhibit our growth, but faith frees us and lets us go. Even the laws of physics can bind us. You might be thinking that our faith can’t do a lot about the laws of physics in setting us free. But just consider that Simon Peter by faith walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee.

Since we have been redeemed, we have the life of Christ which sets us free from the prisons of the ways of the world and religions. With this freedom, we then have all the benefits and responsibilities that come with that life. God also provides the power for us to carry out those responsibilities and to enjoy the benefits by His very presence in our lives.

The Problem – 4:8-11

⁸However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. ⁹But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. Galatians 4:8-11 (NASB95)

Paul reminded these relatively new Christians of “how it used to be” before they came to know God through Jesus Christ. They served “other gods” which really were not worthy to even be referred to as a god. Because they believe in these pagan deities, they acted in certain ways since they tried to follow the “laws” that had grown up around such beliefs. Some of the more primitive religions would have their followers to do certain things at various times of the seasons or, perhaps, during the time of the new moon or full moon. They probably did special observances at the time of the equinoxes of spring and fall. However, it is likely that Paul was referring to all the observances that were on the Israelite religious calendar.

Paul was amazed that they, having heard the good news and having come into a relationship with God, would so easily want to go back into bondage to a different set of rituals, rules, and regulations as was being encouraged by the Judaizers. There were observances and

rituals in the Israelite religion that had taken on such significance that the ritual had become more important than the reality which the rituals and rites represented. While the spiritual aspects of paganism were vastly different from the spiritual aspects of Judaism, the ritual observances seem to have some commonality. Paul was concerned that the Christians in the Galatian churches were simply moving from pagan belief confinement rituals to Israelite Law confinement rituals rather than walking in the freedom that faith in the completed work of Christ gave them.

Now, lest we think too highly of ourselves, just think of what we do with regard to rites and rituals and observances in our churches today. If the subject of “baptism” comes up in a Baptist Church, then there will almost always be a teaching opportunity to emphasize that immersion in water is the proper way to baptize rather than sprinkling since it represents the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. While that is the truth, very seldom will anyone point out that the way disciples are made is to immerse them into the character and nature (name) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which is a lifelong undertaking and is forward looking to sanctification through faith. Baptism in water is a testimony or ritual in which we proclaim publically that we identify with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection which is looking back on our being justified by faith. Based on the emphases we see, it appears that the ritual is more important than the reality.

Going beyond the “religious” things we do and considering the everyday happening in our lives, we may find ourselves turning to the ways of the world for help or guidance rather than turning to the Lord for ability and direction. When we have to make a decision of what to do, we normally consider only factors that are no different from what a non Christian would consider. It is not overly spiritualizing things if we seek the will of the Lord as the first step. Using the ways and wisdom of the world puts us back under the control of the world system and can limit the blessings God has for us.

We learn about the experiences of modern-day missionaries who are sharing the Gospel message to those who grew up in pagan societies. Sometimes the response is that the people hear the Gospel message and embrace it to the extent that they add it to their previous beliefs. When they experience problems or trouble, some will turn to solutions or remedies that they learned from their pagan past rather than turning to God.

What about us? Upon what or whom do we rely when we have problems? Do we turn to God or to our insurance policy? What do we think about if someone mentions security? Is it our relationship and walk with Jesus or the size of our savings account?

In verse eleven, Paul was not concerned about what all his work among the Galatians had “cost” him and was likely not concerned about their future growth. His concern was about what he thought had already happened in that they had embraced a means of salvation that does not work and had already ended with the coming of the Messiah. By advocating “salvation by works of the Law,” they were (in effect) saying that Christ had not come in the flesh since the Law was added to the Promise (given to Abraham and his descendants) until “the Seed shall come” which we understand to be the Messiah. We see in 1 John 4:3 “And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” Since the Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah and yet they were still clinging to the idea of their salvation being dependent on keeping the Law, were they confessing one thing with their mouths and confessing something else with their actions? This reminds me of the adage “What you are doing is so loud I can’t hear what you are saying.” Was this also what the Galatians were

believing? Can you have it both ways or do we not believe the statement “No man can serve two masters?” So what were the options for these people?

The Plea – 4:12-14

¹²I beg of you, brethren, become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you *are*. You have done me no wrong; ¹³but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; ¹⁴and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*. Galatians 4:8-14 (NASB95)

Apparently, it was not too late for those in the churches of Galatia to correct what was happening among them. Paul had already presented the Gospel to them and now his appeal was for them to follow his example. Paul had come out of Judaism to freedom in Christ and lived among Gentiles but was not entangled with the pagan superstitions. He urged the Galatians to do the same thing: to come out of their pagan background and not get entangled with the rules and regulations of either Judaism or paganism.

What did Paul mean when he stated “you have done me no wrong?” Paul had preached this message among them and they had readily and joyfully accepted it before. The Galatians might easily have turned away from Paul since he was, a Jew, a stranger to them, afflicted with an illness that apparently would have normally aroused disgust and loathing by reason of its nature. However, the intervention of God with a miracle changed what they might have done and they welcomed him and the gospel.

Many commentaries suggest that during the First Missionary Journey Paul did not intend to focus on this area since he was targeting the Greek cities of Asia Minor and Greece itself. If it was indeed his illness that resulted in his spending time in that area, then we see how God used that situation to bring a “good” outcome from an otherwise bad situation. The people in this area, in contrast to the Jews, did not reject the message nor try to harm Paul for sharing the truth with them as they wanted to learn more about Jesus.

The reference to Paul’s illness at the time he first visited the area of the Galatian churches remains a mystery although some have speculated that it may have been related to his supposed poor eyesight. Whatever was the ailment that Paul had was not a barrier to the people of that area since they welcomed Paul, even “received him as a representative of Christ.”

The Passion – 4:15-20

¹⁵Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. ¹⁸But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. ¹⁹My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— ²⁰but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Galatians 4:15-20 (NASB95)

All of us have heard the expression “mountaintop experience.” What do we typically think of when we consider those words? One common factor is a sense of the supernatural or the presence of God or a visitation of the Holy Spirit. In general, we might say it is euphoric and a feeling of being blessed. Such an experience might cause people to make sacrificial commitments or even to abandon what they had been doing so they could continue to experience the blessing. Apparently, following the healing miracle of the man lame from birth and the declaration of the Gospel, many of the people in the area of Galatia had such a mountaintop experience when Paul and Barnabas first came to Galatia.

We know that Paul revisited these churches to check on how they were doing during his Second Missionary Journey. Verse sixteen may be an indication that Paul had addressed the

issue of the false teachers during this second visit. It was sometime between his first visit and when he wrote this letter to them that he had communicated the truth to them. Apparently, they were not as eager to fully accept what Paul had told them with regard to what the Judaizers were telling them.

The Judaizers (those Christians who taught that everyone should observe all the Jewish traditions and the law of Moses) were very zealous in their efforts to get new Gentile converts to believe as they did. It would appear that the motivation of these people was carnally based in that they wanted to be able to have a large number of people following them. They wanted the satisfaction of knowing that the Galatian Christians were in *their* camp and not in Paul's camp. There was no good purpose in what they were doing. The Galatians would not be better off in following the traditions of the Jews, in fact, they would be in bondage similar to what they had in their pre-Christian days.

Paul acknowledged that all of us like to be eagerly pursued by someone who would want us to join their organization. We all like to “belong,” however; belonging to something is not good if that “something” does not agree with the truth. The strategy of the Judaizers was to convince the new believers in Galatia that faith in Christ alone was not sufficient so that they would submit to following their teachings and practices of traditional observances of the Law as an added requirement for salvation.

It is very difficult to effectively communicate with people via letters since so much of what we communicate is done with facial expressions and body language. For this reason, Paul wished that he could be there to address them face-to-face as he labored to present convincing proof that the simple message of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith was not only necessary but it was also sufficient. It seems that he had come to the point of not knowing what else he could or should tell them to get them to understand the situation they were in.

In the verses that conclude the fourth chapter, Paul tried one more example from the life of Abraham that involved the difference between the child of the true wife and the child of a bondswoman. This was the comparison and contrast of the offspring of Sarah and Hagar in which the “blessing” was passed on to the child of promise that came from faith and not to the child of the bondswoman that was from human effort.

Paul reminded them and us that when we are born again, we are not fully mature spiritually. Christ is being formed in us. We can harm and inhibit that growth by getting bound up in the legalisms and even “false concepts and ideas” that were assumed to be “truth” in our past. We need to keep ourselves free to grow in Christ and for Christ to grow in us.