

PAUL: THE SPIRITUAL ABOLITIONIST
NOT MAN'S GOSPEL!
PART 14

May 31, 2009

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:1-10

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

Chuck Swindoll, in a sermon entitled, "Emancipated? Then Live Like It!," notes that during the Reconstruction Period following the American Civil War, the general sentiment shared among Plantation owners was, "Keep 'em ignorant and you keep them in the field."

This sentiment was true not only of American slave owners but is also true of the enemy of our faith. One of the primary tactics of the enemy is to keep unbelievers as well as believers ignorant of the gospel and its liberating benefits (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4).

The devil is delighted to keep us in bondage, slaving in the fields of our self-righteous works as that which obtains or maintains God's favor in our lives.

Galatians reminds us that nothing pleases the enemy more than cutting sinners off from the truth of the gospel and its consequent freedom. In 2:4, Paul says that certain false brothers crept into the church in order to take free men and turn them into slaves.

These false brothers were wretched slave traders. They were legalistic, grace killers driven by a satanic desire to bind and shackle Gentile believers by their lists of dos and don'ts as being necessary for one's acceptance with God (e.g., do get circumcised [2:3]; do follow dietary laws [2:12]; do keep the Jewish festal calendar, [4:10]!

The way in which Paul responded is highly instructive. Paul did not respond to the false brother's lists of dos and don'ts with a counter list of "how to" principles and practical tips for the Christian life. Rather, he responded to this legal spirit, by emphasizing the full extent of the gospel of grace and Christian freedom. Paul sought to once again bring his converts back into remembrance of the gospel (1:11).

Paul, thus, sets out to expose and refute the error of these false brothers by arguing for the genuine nature of the gospel in 2:1-10. The true nature of the gospel is a free promise of life in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Tim.1:1).

Christ alone is the sole ground of the sinner's acceptance with God. No addition of works can be made without destroying the truth of the gospel and forfeiting one's spiritual freedom for spiritual slavery.

Spiritual freedom is one of the key themes of this letter, of which the phrase in v. 4 provides a fitting summary, "*our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus...*" Paul's burden

was to preserve the truth of the gospel and thus give his Galatian converts permission to be free, absolutely free in Christ.

Before going any further, let's pause for a moment and review the first two truths of Christian freedom that we looked at last week.

What is this freedom that originates from the gospel?

I. SPIRITUAL FREEDOM CONSISTS OF FREEDOM FROM THE NECESSITY OF OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW FOR JUSTIFICATION BEFORE GOD.

The gospel frees a person from the impossible, burdensome demand of perfect obedience for obtaining salvation. That which God requires of man in His Law, He has freely given in His gospel, as the prophet Ezekiel foretold:

“²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules,” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

To be sure the believer obeys. But, his obedience is not for life but rather from life. The gospel is the power of God not only for forgiveness of sins but also for holiness of life (obedience to God's Law).

II. SPIRITUAL FREEDOM CONSISTS OF FREEDOM FROM THE CURSE AND CONDEMNATION OF GOD'S LAW.

As spiritual slaves, we were held captive in the chains of sin and sentenced as condemned lawbreakers. Thomas Boston writes, "...wrath follows the natural man, as his shadow does his body," (*Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, p. 157).

However, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus, our great Emancipator, paid the ultimate price by dying on the cross to abolish once and for all our slavery to sin and to free us from the curse and condemnation of God's Law.

Christ bought us back from slavery and purchased our freedom by the payment of a price, His life! As Paul says in Galatians 3:13, Christ "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...."

Therefore, the law is void of its power to curse and condemn the believer. It can no longer inflict its punishment on us. It can no longer pronounce its death sentence against us. The law is now like a roaring toothless tiger, it can make a lot of noise but it has no more bite!

This brings us to a third glorious truth regarding spiritual freedom.

LESSON:

III. SPIRITUAL FREEDOM CONSISTS IN THE BELIEVER'S UNION WITH CHRIST.

In 2:4, Paul writes, "...our freedom that we have *in Christ Jesus*," (emphasis mine). Don't quickly skip over the phrase, "in Christ Jesus," in 2:4.

This phrase indicates the sphere or basis for the believer's freedom (cf., Burton, *Galatians*, p. 85). It is by virtue of our union with Christ that we have (ἐξομεν, present tense) freedom.

Through the gospel and faith, the Holy Spirit brings sinners into union with Christ, who is the source of freedom (Gal. 1:16; John 8:32, 36; 14:7).

As we have learned, spiritual slavery consists of being under the law and consequently under its curse. To be cursed is to fall under the penal sanction of God's law (i.e., to incur His wrath, which is simply "His justice in action," cf., Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 52).

As bad as this is (and it is!), the worst aspect of being cursed involves being cut off from God (i.e., not vitally united to Christ). The curse of the Law culminates in the complete absence and withdrawal of God from a human soul.

God never intended for man to be cut off from a living, vital union with Him. God created every human soul to be a habitation of God, to live in communion with his Creator.

However, when Adam sinned (and thus all men with him), God banished him (along with all humanity) from His gracious presence. Man no longer had access or communion with God in his fallen state. In Ephesians 2:12, Paul says that man in his fallen state is without God in the world, void of all hope. Thomas Boston writes, "The sun is gone down on them, and there is not the least glimpse of favor towards them from heaven," (*Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, p. 155).

There are those who think and teach that true freedom consists of being free of God. The famous American actress, Frances Farmer, first gained national notoriety while a senior at West Seattle High School when she wrote her award-winning, provocative essay "God Dies." This is how she began her essay,

"No one ever came to me and said, "You're a fool. There isn't such a thing as God. Somebody's been stuffing you." It wasn't murder. I think God just died of old age. And, when I realized that he wasn't any more, it didn't shock me. It seemed natural and right!"

Yet, what seems so natural and right to the fallen heart ultimately turns out to be the source of it's own self-imprisonment and bondage. To be deprived of God is the height of what it means to be cursed.

We see this reality graphically portrayed in Jesus' death on the cross. George Smeaton, commenting on Christ becoming a curse for sinners on the cross, writes,

“It (Christ being cursed-J.F.) consisted especially in the privation of God, and in the desertion, which extorted from Him many agonizing complaints; for the worst ingredient of the curse is the loss of God, or the absence and complete withdrawal of God from a human soul, made to be His habitation,” (*The Apostle's Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 248).

In Luke 22:44, Luke records that Jesus was in such agony he began to sweat drops of blood in anticipation of becoming a curse for sinners, which no doubt included the terrifying prospect of His Father's desertion and total withdrawal of His presence. In Matthew 27:46, as He hung on the cross to redeem us from the curse, He cried out with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”

In one sense, it is impossible to fully comprehend Christ's suffering as a curse and experiencing the complete loss of God. Yet, there are at least two significant truths we can learn.

FIRST, CHRIST'S SUFFERING MAGNIFIES THE MISERABLE STATE OF ALL WHO ARE NOT UNITED TO CHRIST.

Christ's suffering provides a graphic depiction into the awful reality of the complete withdrawal of God from a human soul.

Thomas Boston asks,

“Why was the Son of God a son under wrath—but because the children of men were children of wrath? He suffered the wrath of God; not for himself—but for those who were liable to it in their own persons. Nay, this not only shows us to have been liable to wrath—but also that wrath must have a vent, in the punishment of sin...What a miserable case must a sinner be in, who is out of Christ; that is not vitally united to Christ, and partakes not of his Spirit! God, who spared not his own Son, surely will not spare such a one,” (*Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, p. 163).

SECOND, CHRIST'S SUFFERING ASSURES THE BLESSED STATE OF ALL WHO ARE UNITED TO CHRIST.

The gospel assures us that we presently possess the immeasurable and unspeakable privilege of being in union with Christ.

The good news of the gospel is that because Christ experienced the total loss of God, sinners can now be reunited to the full life of God! Christ suffered misery so that we can enjoy blessing. Christ was abandoned so that we might be adopted. Christ was bound that we might be freed!

Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, we have been restored to the purpose for which we were created and the resulting consequence is freedom.

CONCLUSION:

The privileges of our union with Christ are vast and unspeakable.

The force of the phrase, “in Christ Jesus” in v. 4, indicates that believers possess the very freedom that Christ possesses! The freedom believer’s possess then is no ordinary freedom. As a result of our union with Christ,

1. WE ARE FREE FROM ALL LEGAL REQUIREMENTS FOR OBTAINING LIFE BY THE LAW (“DO AND LIVE.”)

Our union with Christ is a union sustained in law. This is to say, when we were slaves living under the law, we ran up a huge debt to the justice of God. Christ, however, kept God’s law, bore all its penalties for us and paid our debt in full.

Thus, when we believe on Him, we are united to Him and His obedience and payment for our debt is reckoned to us as if we had obeyed, suffered and paid for it ourselves! As one Bible teacher writes, “Since Christ is free, no member of Christ’s body can be bound,” (Guthrie, *Galatians*, p. 79).

Therefore, as those who are in Christ, we do not work to earn God’s favor and blessing (“Do and Live.”) rather we work because we have God’s favor and blessing (“Live, now Do!”).

2. WE ARE FREE TO ENJOY OUR NEW STATUS AS SONS UNDER THE GRACE AND FAVOR OF GOD.

We frequently speak about the things from which we have been saved (e.g., the curse of the law, condemnation, wrath, hell, etc...) but too often to the neglect of the things to which we are saved. We not only have a freedom *from* but also a freedom *to*!

For example, to be in Christ is not only to possess freedom from the wrath and judgment of God (John 3:36), but it is also freedom to enjoy the privilege of being made a son and to live under the grace and favor of God. In Galatians 3:26, Paul writes, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (emphasis mine; Gal. 3:26).

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM CONSISTS IN THE INHERITANCE OF THE FULL RIGHTS OF SONS.

When Christ redeemed us from the slave market of sin, He didn’t just put us out on the street, give us \$5 and say to us, “Good luck.” No! God the Father took us from our wretched, orphaned condition and adopted us into His royal family as sons. He clothed us with His robes of righteousness! He put a ring on our hand (a seal indicating family

belongingness) and shoes on our feet because we are no longer slaves but freemen and brought us to feast at His banquet table (Lk. 15:22-23).

By virtue of our redemption and union with Christ, we now possess the same blessings as our elder brother, Christ Himself!

So, for example, if someone were to ask you, “*Is God pleased with you?*,” how would you respond?

There are so many believers who live their lives under the continual, secret suspicion that God is really displeased with them. Though they may not voice it, many live their lives like the game, “He loves me, He loves me not,” in which a man picks petals off a flower to determine whether the woman he is speaking of loves him or not.

Regrettably, this is the way a great number of believers think about their relationship with the Lord. They live with an uncertainty as to God’s favor. Does God really love me? Am I really walking in His favor? Are His promises really true for me?

They see themselves as some how still under the curse, judgment and displeasure of God. As a result, their lives are characterized by a quiet despair. This is exactly where the enemy of our faith wants us to be (i.e., blinded by unbelief in regard to the life-changing truth of the gospel). “Keep ‘em ignorant and you keep ‘em in the field.”

But, the good news of the gospel announces to us that God is pleased with His people.

The cross and resurrection stand as an eternal reminder shouting to us, “Yes! You are no longer a condemned slave! You are now received as a fully, beloved son with whom God is pleased! All of God’s promises to you in Christ are Yes and Amen!”

Note carefully. God the Father is pleased with you not because of you. He is pleased with you because you are united to His Son! When He sees you, He sees His Son! All who Christ is and all He has done are reckoned to you by virtue of your union to Him!

Therefore, whatever God the Father says about His only begotten Son, He also says about His adopted sons. This is what God the Father says about His only begotten Son, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” (Matt. 3:17).

In his famous work, *Christian Liberty*, Martin Luther discussing the benefit of faith and union with Christ writes,

“Accordingly, the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own...Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s...” (p. 14).

In Christ, believers are in blessed state rather than a cursed state. All who are united to Christ are walking in the full favor and blessing of God. In Ephesians 1:6, Paul says that God the Father has blessed us in the Beloved (i.e., in His Son).

Through unbelief, believers are often tempted to think consciously or unconsciously thoughts like, “Such an announcement is just too good to be true. How could God be pleased with me? Look at me. I fail so much!”

Yet, we must remember that our favored status as beloved sons with whom God is well pleased is not dependent upon our performance (i.e., works of the law) but rather Christ’s performance for us!

Consider carefully the following counsel by Walter Marshall,

“Now, you might think that you are unworthy to have such a great gift as union with Christ. Remember, however, Christ shed his precious blood to redeem you. That precious blood will enable you to miraculously advance in holiness through your union with Christ. Union with Christ is not a privilege you earn by your sincere obedience, or by your own attempts at holiness. Your union with Christ is not a reward of your own good works. Rather, union with Christ is a privilege that God gives to every Christian when they first become a Christian! Right when you enter into the kingdom of God, you also enter into union with Christ! This union with Christ is the foundation for all of your obedience to God. All of your good works as a Christian flow out of your union with Christ. All of your sincere obedience to the law is the fruit of your union with Christ,” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 41).

Our favored status is solely dependent upon God’s promise to us as announced in the gospel! What is this announcement?

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased,” (Lk. 2:14)!

Thus, as a result of our union with Christ, we are free to enjoy our new status as sons, who now live under the grace and favor of God!

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