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Title: Embracing Freedom

Text: Galatians 4:1-31

I'm very appreciative of those who give of themselves to preserve our freedom. So many have sacrificed large portions of their lives in our behalf. Many have GIVEN their lives for us. American soldiers lives are regularly lost in battle defending our freedom, as well, the freedom of others.

How would you define freedom? Although we usually associate it with opportunities to pursue our rights, ambitions, and dreams without hindrance from government, Jesus spoke of a deeper form of liberty – a freedom that pertains to the condition of our souls. God wants to free us from every internal form of bondage that prevents us from becoming all that He created us to be. The method of achieving this kind of freedom does not come through war or revolution, but by the knowledge of truth. That's why Jesus said, *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"* (John 8:31-32).

Although it may seem like we already have all the freedom we need, at one point or another we've all been held captive. First of all, before we were saved, we were enslaved to sin. But Jesus came to set us free by paying our sin debt in full! On the cross, He made a way for us to be forgiven and declared righteous (Luke 19:10). However, because we live in a fallen world with all sorts of deceptions, difficulties, and hurts, we may still have hidden areas of bondage that the Lord wants to deal with so we can live in TRUE freedom.

Today we will primarily look at what Galatians 4 says about our freedom – that is the freedom we find in Christ.

In the book of Genesis, God told Abraham (whose name at the time was Abram) that he would be the father of a great nation. Genesis 12:1-3 reads, *"Then the Lord told Abram, 'Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others.'" A little while later, God said to Abraham, "Look as far as you can see in every direction. I am going to give all this land to you and your offspring as a permanent possession. And I am going to give you so many descendants that, like dust, they cannot be counted!"* (Genesis 13:14-16). A little while later God said again, *"Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that – too many to count!"* (Genesis 15:5). These were bold promises! The next verse states that Abraham believed them, but there was a problem. He didn't have any children AND he and his wife Sarah were well beyond child-bearing years. Sarah giving birth seemed like an impossible idea – especially since she had been childless throughout her whole life. In their culture I understand it was common practice that when a woman could not have children, the husband would father a child through one of the woman's slaves (or handmaidens). So, Sarah gave her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham and said, *"Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her"* (Genesis 16:2). So the slave of Sarah gave birth to a son, and he was named Ishmael.

Now, fast forward 13 years. Abraham is now almost 100. Sarah is 90. God appears to Abraham again and says, *"Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my everlasting covenant with him and his descendants. As for Ishmael, I will bless him also...but my covenant is with Isaac, who will be born to you about this time next year"* (Genesis 17:19-21). When Abraham heard this, he laughed. When Sarah heard this, she laughed too. Interestingly, the name "Isaac" means "he laughs." I think God chose that name because He was getting in the last laugh. What we see in the story of Isaac and Ishmael and Sarah and Hagar is the difference in living by law and living by faith.

Years before, God gave a promise to Abraham: I will cause you to become a great nation and I will bless the world through your offspring. Abraham believed the promise, but then he and Sarah set about trying to bring that promise to fulfillment through THEIR OWN BEST EFFORTS; the episode with Hagar and Sarah ensued. By the way, it shouldn't surprise you that after Abraham fathered a son through Hagar, Sarah and Hagar never got along. Neither will it surprise you that their sons, Ishmael and Isaac, didn't get along very well either. AND neither have their descendants. In fact, the turmoil continues today. God's plan, however, was NOT for Abraham to have a son with another woman. God's plan was to bless Abraham and Sarah together. It was through THEIR child that God intended to confirm His everlasting promise. It was through their child, Isaac, and his descendants, that the Messiah would come into the world and bring salvation to all nations.

Back to the book of Galatians. Paul says, *"The son of the slave-wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God's own fulfillment of his promise. Now*

these two women serve as an illustration of God's two covenants. Hagar, the slave-wife, represents Mount Sinai where people first became enslaved to the law. And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery. But Sarah, the free woman, represents the heavenly Jerusalem. And she is our mother" (v. 23-24). Paul is saying that if you are trying to fulfill the requirements of the law and earn God's favor through YOUR OWN BEST EFFORTS, then you are following the tradition of the slave-woman. But, if instead, you are putting YOUR FAITH IN GOD and TRUSTING HIM to fulfill His promise through you, NOT on the basis of your own good works, but on the basis of HIS MERCY – then you are following the tradition of the free woman. Paul is encouraging us to be children of the promise, not children of the law. He's encouraging us to base our life – and our relationship to God – on faith in Jesus Christ, not on our limited ability to keep the requirements of the law.

Near the end of the chapter Paul says, "So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, obligated to the law. We are children of the free woman, acceptable to God because of our faith" (v. 31). It is our faith that saves us. It is our faith that sustains us. If we are to live in victory, we must learn to live by faith. If we are to live in victory, we must break free once and for all from the chains of slavery to the law, and embrace the freedom in Christ that God has promised to all of us through faith. Some of you might say, "Good idea, Pastor Jim. I'm all for it. I've been a slave for too many years and I'm ready to experience freedom. The question is: HOW? How do I step into this freedom that you're talking about?" Let's look at a few verses in Galatians chapter four that will show you how to step into the freedom that God has in store for you. There are three steps that we take; we take each one by faith.

- 1. ACCEPT THE FATHER'S AFFECTION.** Without any help from me, start the Lord's Prayer – "Our Father..." We all know that God is our Father. We can say it, sing it, pray it, even quote it from the Bible, yet in spite of all the religious verbiage, many have difficulty in approaching God as a Father. We think – "God's not too crazy about me. God got stuck with me on a technicality." Being legalistic, we don't approach God, in faith, as a loving father. Rather many approach Him in fear as a stern taskmaster. However, He hasn't given us permission to approach Him that way, because that's NOT who He is. Do you know how He wants us to approach Him? Listen to these verses – "But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father" (v. 4-6). In the original Greek, Paul inserted an Aramaic word there – the word "Abba." It is a term of affection, like the word "Papa," or maybe the word "Daddy." Paul is saying that we can have a personal intimate relationship with God, and we can approach Him as we would approach an affectionate, loving father. For some of us this requires a tremendous step of faith, because this is not the concept we have of God. When many people think of God, they think of disapproval, judgment, vengeance, anger, and on and on. That is particularly the case for those who have had an earthly father marked by those characteristics. They've also heard a few verses here and there and they use them to form a one-dimensional image of God that is something like a cardboard cut-out you see in a record store. It's almost accurate, but not exactly. I want you to know that if your image of God doesn't portray Him as a loving, tender, affectionate father – a father who loves you so much that He would adopt you to be His very own – then you don't know God. If you want to experience freedom, approach God as your LOVING Father, and accept His affection. I have learned that the better I know God, and the longer I know Him, the easier it is to do this. As the song says, our God is an awesome God. He is righteous. He is holy. He is just. AND He loves us just as the very best kind of father loves his child. He is tender. He is affectionate. And, Paul says, He is generous. "Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you" (v. 7). Wow! You are God's OWN CHILD and EVERYTHING HE HAS BELONGS TO YOU! Do you want to experience freedom? Then discover God's love for you. Approach Him as a father, not a taskmaster. Accept His affection. This will change the focus of your Christian life from striving to follow a set of impossible rules to striving to please a loving father. There is a big difference, and this difference will set you free.
- 2. LOSE YOUR RELIGION.** Listen to what Paul said, "Now that you have found God (or should I say, now that God has found you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual powers of this world? You are trying to find favor with God by what you do or don't do on certain days or months or seasons or years. I fear for you..." (v. 9-11). I have attended and ministered in a variety of kinds of churches. In the process I have learned that there are many Christians in each kind of church – contemporary, traditional, big, small, conservative, liberal – that suffer the same malady: some are slaves to religion. They think that their denomination's way of doing things (or their NON-denominational way of doing things) is the only way to truly worship God. I suppose it was in the 60s I got the idea that a male can't be a Christian if he has

long hair, and some struggled with having a guitar in the church. Before that, some struggled with having an organ in the church. Today in our contemporary churches, we often see the same kind of religiosity. Many of today's churches have drums and guitars and power-point graphics and many of the songs we sing are new. Some use lights and smoke. Not so long ago a pastor I'm acquainted with preached at a church with a traditional choir, the only instrument was a piano and all the songs were from a hymnbook. A lady from his church asked him, "How could you possibly worship in that environment – with just a piano, singing all of those outdated songs?" He answered her by saying, first of all, those so-called outdated songs were some of the best ever written. And secondly, experiencing God in worship isn't about the drums and guitars; it's about bringing your heart to Him. Could it be that sometimes we become enslaved to religious ritual? Did you know that external religion has the ability to choke the life out of your spiritual experience? We must guard against legalism. In fact, when I say "external religion" – if your mind immediately goes to a church of another denomination, then you're missing the point. We have our own struggles right here. For the Galatians, it was a struggle against legalistically following a certain religious calendar. In our situation, we tend to be legalistic about the style of music and the kind of songs we sing, the order of worship or too rigid of a worship order, or what day or time services are held. Do you want to experience freedom? Let go of all man-made rules of religion and FOCUS INSTEAD on YOUR spiritual relationship TO GOD. Now, I'm not saying that you need to abandon the church or turn your back on organized Christian fellowship. What I am saying is this: if your relationship with God is based exclusively on a building, musical equipment, a song list, and the name that is on the sign outside the church, then you might be flirting with legalism and courting slavery.

- 3. RETURN TO YOUR FIRST LOVE.** This phrase is based on some verses from the book of Revelation. Jesus is speaking to the church in Ephesus, and He says, *"I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as much as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen from your first love! Turn back to me again and work as you did at first"* (Revelation 2:4-5). Paul said something similar to the church in Galatia. He talks about how warmly he was received by the believers there. He says, *"You took me in and cared for me as though I were an angel from God or even Christ Jesus himself. Where is that joyful spirit we felt together then?"* (v. 14-15). Paul is saying, "Back then, when you were living by grace, you were full of joy. Now that you are wrapped up in trying to obey the law, where is your joy?" Nothing drains the joy out of life like living with the constant reminder that you don't measure up or living with the constant threat of disapproval. It is that kind of mentality that makes the Christian life a competition, and it breeds self-righteousness. "Well, I may not be perfect, but at least I'm better than you." I've discovered that when I'm focused on living in victory through faith and walking in God's grace, I lose any interest I might have had in keeping a score card on other Christians. When I realize that God is not grading me that way, I stop trying to grade them. I've also discovered that when I'm living in victory through faith and walking by grace, joy is never out of reach. There's nothing more joyful than living by grace. So the step of faith that you need to take here is, in a sense, a step backward. Move back to the way your relationship with God was in the early days. If you're like me, in those days you didn't come to church with a critical attitude, ready to pick apart the music and the sermon, and any other detail of the service. You didn't look at other people with an attitude of self-righteous condemnation, counting all the ways in which THEY don't measure up to YOUR standard. All you knew was that you were in love with Jesus and you were so full of joy you couldn't keep it to yourself. Do you want to experience freedom? Take a step back in that direction. Return to your first love. Remember that Christianity is, first and foremost, about loving Jesus. St. Augustine said the Christian life can be summarized as "Love God, and do what you like." Upon hearing that quote in church, a woman sitting up front gasped, because the idea sounded so scandalous to her. But think about it. If you really love God, then what will you want to do? You'll want to please Him. So, Love God, and do what you like. ILLUSTRATION: A husband and wife were driving down the street and the wife said, "Our marriage isn't what it used to be. We used to hug and kiss and cuddle all the time. It's not like that anymore. In fact," she said, "when we used to go out on dates, I never sat over here by the passenger door. I always sat in the middle seat right next to you. But it's not like that anymore." The husband looked at her and said, "Who moved?" The same can be said of our relationship to God. When we move away from that love relationship and replace it with religion, we lose the vibrant connection we once had with God. But the question is, who moved? We did! From day one, God's desire has been that our relationship with Him would be a relationship of love, based on faith. If it has become nothing but rules and regulations to you, who moved?
- 4. Conclusion.** Let me end by asking you the question – "Who's your mama?" Paul said that we're not children of the slave-woman, we're children of the free woman. We are the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham and

Sarah. God DOESN'T want us to live as SLAVES, in fear; He WANTS us to live as SONS and DAUGHTERS, in faith. He wants us to exercise our faith so that we can experience freedom. Through faith, approach God as your father, not your taskmaster, and accept His affection for you. Through faith, lose your religion, let go of your churchianity, and focus on your relationship to your Father. Our relationship with the Father is through Jesus and Jesus alone. It's not our righteousness or good works. It's the fulfillment of the promises of God. It's the work of Jesus. Through faith, return to (or move toward, maybe for the first time in your life) a relationship with God that is based on love. Forget about how you measure up to others or how they measure up to you, and turn your heart completely towards Jesus, and STRIVE TO LOVE HIM ABOVE ALL ELSE. If you haven't received the Promise of Jesus and are trying to work your way into heaven – then you're like the son or daughter of the slave woman and being born to a slave woman makes you a slave. But when you put your faith in Jesus, and allow yourself to bask in His love, you will experience freedom beyond that which words can express. *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love"* (Galatians 5:13).