

Text: Galatians 4:8-11 – Finding Freedom

Exegetical Big Idea: Reverting to obedience to the law for righteousness is idolatry and slavery to idols.

Homiletical Big Idea: **Don't look to anything else, for what can only be found in Christ.**

Fallen Condition Focus: Though true freedom is found in Christ, humans are nonetheless drawn to seek this freedom in other things, which only leads to emptiness, sorrow, and ultimately slavery.

Background:

The thing that sticks out to me in these verses is Paul's heartbreaking concern that all of his labours to the church in Galatia, all of his time and effort and resources spent on them to call them to Christ, all of this is potentially in vain.

He fears that his labours for them are in vain because his preaching has been to call them to repentance and obedience to Christ. He's preached a message of good news that salvation from sin and death is found only in Jesus as a generous gift of grace. This gift is received not by works, as if trying to earn it could ever work, but by faith.

This has been his preaching, and yet the church now seems to be listening to Jewish leaders who have visited them and preached an opposite gospel message. They have been preaching that it's not just faith that saves you, but hard work and obedience to the Jewish law and traditions.

Now just to be clear, this is not a passage that is teaching that a person can lose their faith. Paul is not writing to a single person, (in fact not even a single church in one sense) but to a group of people. Paul is concerned for the church in Galatia as a whole. If they, as a church, reject the gospel and turn to legalism, then Paul fears his labour for them is in vain.

In fact Paul's concern is one more of perseverance. It's a much needed reminder that salvation in Christ is not just praying a prayer and stamping your ticket to heaven, but about treasuring Christ above all else. Time, more than anything, is the revealer of who is truly in Christ and who is trusting in themselves for salvation.

Intro:

There was a general rule in my house growing up. A rule that I now understand a lot better as a parent myself. That's not to say I am good at following this rule in my own house but that's beside the point. The rule that I remember is the rule that whatever mom or dad made for dinner, is what you eat. Our house was not a restaurant, and if you didn't like what was put in front of you, then too bad. Maybe you had a rule like that at your house?

However, my parents were also gracious. There was one exception to the rule. There was one meal that my mother made that I simply could not get down. And if you know me, and you know I like all food, this might surprise you. Now I'm not trying to insult my mother's cooking, because even she admits today that this meal was not very good. It was her beef stew. The meat was dry, the potato pieces were too big, and whatever seasoning was in it was simply unpalatable. Now, I'd probably eat it today, and much

of my dislike was probably due to me being a child and children have weird tastes, but it was still nonetheless my least favourite.

It's that stew that comes to mind when I read of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25. You'll remember these two brothers. Esau was the oldest and Jacob was the youngest. In those days the oldest son was the special one. The oldest son was a sign of blessing from God, and a sign of vitality and health. It was also the hope that the oldest son would be the one to carry on the family line. So more resource were poured into the older son, and he would often be "the favourite".

So one day the oldest son, Esau, was out in the fields and he came in starving. Well Jacob just happened to be making some stew as Esau came in. Esau asks his brother for some stew. Jacob however sees an opportunity to steal from his brother. Jacob demands Esau's birthright. One way to think of the birthright is the "specialness" of being born first.

So they make a trade! Esau trades in his special birthright status for a bowl of stew. That is *not* a good trade! And an even worse trade if the stew tasted like the stew I had growing up.

But the question is why? Why would Esau make that trade? The answer is simple, because in that moment, Esau valued the stew more than his birthright. In that moment, benefit he could get from that stew was *more* than the benefit he could get from his birthright. That's foolish.

Paul sees the same thing in the Galatian church, but to a much bigger degree. They're not trading in their birthright for some stew, they're trading in their sonship and daughterhip in God for slavery! That's a bad trade! But the truth is, we're not so different. Pride will often lead us to look for delight and identity and salvation in things other than Christ, but that only leads to slavery.

Salvation, identity, peace, joy, eternal life, and so much more is yours in Christ Jesus by grace through faith. Looking for these in any place else is simply slavery.

Don't look to anything else, for what can only be found in Christ.

V.8 humanity's biggest problem, is the failure to know and worship God

Verse 8 starts with "formerly, when you did not know God..." Paul is speaking here of the pre-Christian life. Now he may here have some optimism that many Galatians are genuine Christians, and we can actually be quite certain of that in the way he speaks in the rest of the letter. But nonetheless generally speaking he is speaking of anyone and everyone who ever lived. Our default, from the moment of conception, is not knowing God.

The idea of "knowing" God here has more than just the meaning of knowledge. Of course this is certainly true that babies and young kids don't have a knowledge of God, but it's so much more than that. There are many adults who have what you would consider a "knowledge" of God. So what is Paul talking about here? Knowing God in the ultimate sense is bring in relationship with him.

But we were originally created to worship him and be in relationship with him! We were meant to be sons and daughters of God, walking and talking with him, enjoying his presence and delighting in his commands. We were created for the purpose of glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

But we traded that in. We traded it for rebellion. We traded it in for the hope of being our own gods.

To not know God then, in this sense that Paul is talking about is the willful denial of who God and what he does. We chose to not acknowledge his sovereignty, his holiness, his goodness, his ownership over us as creator, and other things. So to not know God is so much more than not knowing *about* God, it's not acknowledging the things of God that are plain for everyone to see.

And what does it lead to? Paul tells us that in this verse. He writes that when we did not know God, we "were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." What exactly are the "those things" that Paul is talking about? Well for the Galatians it's probably mostly pagan religions. Paul's reminding them of the pagan rituals and false gods that they came out of when they heard the message of the gospel and turned to Christ.

Now this is foreign to you and I since we live in a culture that denies the existence of God, whereas they lived in a world where there were more so-called gods than you could count! But the point is the same: All humans worship something. You either worship the Creator of all things, which is the only true God, or you worship creation, whether that be a false god or even yourself.

Whatever you worship, if it's not the only true God, you are enslaved. Paul picks his words very carefully. Did you know that Paul calls himself a slave? Paul uses the same word for slave in the introduction to many of his letters. He calls himself a "slave" of Christ Jesus. I know we tend to think of slavery as beyond our control and without choice, and certainly there are aspects of that here, but the truth is we love our slavery. Paul loves his service to Christ. Paul glories in the fact that he is a "slave" or servant of Christ! He wants it!

In the same way, but in a way that is destructive, we want our slavery to sin. Yes it's true that sin binds us so that we cannot escape, but we also don't want to by nature.

I was reading in Isaiah chapter 5 the other day and Isaiah is condemning the people of Israel for their sin against God, and how God will bring judgment on them. There are a series of "woes" to the nation. The picture that stood out to me was when Isaiah says woe to those who drag along their sin in a cart, who pull it along with ropes. It's the picture of gathering up all the sin we can carry, and when we can't hold it all we look for a cart to put it in. And we love it so much we want to drag it along with us everywhere we go, so we tie ropes to the cart and with all our strength pull it so that we can keep it with us.

[My mind thinks of a kid on a beach collecting rocks. Every rock they come across is more interesting than the next, and yet every rock needs to be collected. It's not long before the kid's pockets are full of rocks. Then the kid fills their hat with rocks. When there is no more room left to store rocks what do they do? They fill their parents' pockets with rocks! There is a need to collect more rocks]

Our chief problem as humans is not that we are servants, or slaves. You are a slave to whatever it is you worship. Our problem is that we chose the wrong master.

Worshiping created order is rebellion against our creator and is the choice to serve sin. Sin is a horrible master. Sin destroys. Sin kills. Sin only brings sorrow and pain and sadness. Sin is a taking master.

Christ is a giving master. God doesn't need anything from us! If God doesn't need anything from us, and instead he is a loving and gracious and merciful and gentle master, then all that leaves is for God to *give* to us.

That's the kind of master that is good to serve! The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. Sin takes like, Christ gives eternal life.

Our biggest problem, is that we don't know and worship God. And the reason why that is, is because we look to other things, for what can only be found in Christ.

Don't look to anything else, for what can only be found in Christ.

V 9 God himself comes to us to meet our need.

I don't get tired of pointing out that the little words in Scripture are hugely important! Paul begins verse 9 with "but". A shift has happened! The hope is that the Galatians have turned from willful denial of God and his works, to a willful acknowledgment and glorying in God and his works! In the same way that "knowing" God in the previous verse meant so much more than knowledge *of* God, it means so much more here as well. They have been brought into relationship with God! They are right with God!

But how? Sin is a cruel slave master and would never let us go willingly. In fact given the chance we wouldn't even want to leave our master. I can't stress this enough: There is no human being who, on his or her own strength and will, wakes up one morning and decides they are done with sin and want a new master. It does not and cannot happen. That's why Paul clarifies his own statement next when he writes "...or rather to be known *by* God".

Paul is making it clear that it is more accurate to say that we are known *by* God, than it is to say that we know God. The difference is in who is doing the work. The only reason as person can say "I know God", is because God revealed himself to that person, revealed their need for Christ, and gave them the desire and ability to turn to Christ.

Throughout the Old Testament the concept of God "knowing" a person or people is always connected with him "choosing" a person or people. When God knows Abraham, he chooses Abraham and calls him out of the land of Ur. When God knows the people of Israel, he calls them out of the nations of the earth to be his own. When God calls Jeremiah to prophet ministry he says to him in 1:5 "Before I formed you I *knew* you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations"

We know God only because he knows and chose us first. And it has to be this way.

Jesus himself told this to his disciples. In Matt 11:27 Jesus says "no one know the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son..." There is a circle! The Father alone knows the Son and the Son alone knows the Father. It's a closed loop and we are not in it. You can't know the Father, because you are not the Son. And you can't know the Son because you are not the Father.

It's because of this closed loop that we cannot know God on our own! We need to be invited in. Thankfully, the verse doesn't end there. Jesus continues "...no one know the Father except the Son, *and* those to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal him"

That loop is broken when Christ chooses to reveal the Father to us. It is only through the work of God that we are able to know God. Why is this important? Because it is in this context of being able to know God by God's power that we read the next few verses in Matthew where Jesus says "come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest". Jesus is talking about the burden of our slavery

to sin! We know this because these verses are in the context of cities and people who will *not* repent of their sin and acknowledge Jesus! Jesus offers a trade. He offers to shed the yoke of slavery to sin, and put on his yoke, which is light because it is a yoke of grace and mercy. He also promises rest for the soul. No more fear of the judgement of God, only glorying in his presence for all of eternity.

And all of this, because God reveals himself *to us*, and we are known *by him*.

So here is where we get to Paul's main concern. He poses a rhetorical question in the middle of verse 9 when he asks "how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?"

Knowing all that God has done for you in Christ Jesus, why on earth are you turning back to slavery to worthless idols and sin!? Why trade this? Why take the yoke of slavery back upon yourself?

Paul calls these things "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world". When we want to do things *our* way, and be our own gods, it never ends well. Paul calls these things "weak and worthless". Weak because whatever we try for the purpose of satisfying God so that we will be welcomed by him is absolutely futile. The word Paul uses here for "worthless" is the word that is used in the New Testament for someone who is destitute and a beggar. Trusting in anything else but Christ will leave you destitute and utterly ruined.

[God, through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 2:13), describes Israel's rebellion against God as a people who have rejected the Spring of living water. The spring of water is right there for them! It flows liberally and freely. But they've rejected it, not because they aren't thirsty, but because they want to find their own source. So they turned from the spring, and as Jeremiah puts it, they have dug for themselves cisterns. A cistern is basically a hole that you dig to hold water. But Jeremiah describes the cisterns that the people have dug as broken cisterns that hold no water. Right there available to them is a spring of living water, but in their sin the people have turned away to dig their own holes to find dirty, contaminated, water that drains away.]

Jesus is the Spring of Living Water. Rejecting him is like turning away and digging your own hole in the mud to desperately find some kind of water to quench your thirst. All the while he is offering his salvation to you.

Christ's offer extends to you today. Turn to him and confess your sins. He will forgive you, cleanse you, and give you a new heart that desires him. By faith, you can have the hope of eternal life today.

But we do this too as Christians. Is your delight in Christ growing cold? Start with examining yourself to see if you're digging a cistern. In God's mercy, he is there if we choose to just turn around and drink deeply.

Don't look to anything else, for what can only be found in Christ.

V.10-11 The Gospel does not to call you do better, but to be made new in Christ.

This gospel message, of turning to Christ in faith to be reconciled to God, is a message of freedom, not simply a different kind of slavery. The Galatians are observing "days and months and seasons and years".

What exactly is going on here? These are almost certainly the days and month and seasons of the Jewish calendar. Remember that the false teachers are trying to get the Galatian church to mix in Judaism with their faith in Christ. So the Galatians are starting to adhere to these Jewish holidays. These would be the Passover, the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath, etc.

Remember that just a few verses ago, he was telling the Galatians about their slavery to sin before they came to Christ. This slavery largely took the form of idol worship. But now Paul is concerned that they are simply jumping out of one form of slavery, just to go into another. Sure, they have left the pagan idols behind, but now they are being convinced that they need to adhere to Jewish traditions for salvation. This is not helping them!

Both are idolatry. Both reject God. Paul's desire for them is not for them to just be different slaves, but to be free from slavery altogether and become sons and daughters of God.

But hold on a second. What's wrong with observing Jewish holidays? Is it wrong for a Christian to celebrate the Passover? Is it wrong for a Christian to take a Sabbath? Consider that Paul himself would often observe Jewish tradition. He says so himself in 1 Corinthians 9 when he says "to the Jews I became like a Jew.." and "To those under the law I became like one under the law...". Paul goes on to say that to those *not* under the law, he became like one *not* under the law. And just to be clear, Paul is not talking about clearly sinful things, he's talking about Jewish tradition.

But how can Paul do this? The answer is his freedom in Christ.

Here's the difference, the Galatians are observing these traditions because they that by them they are pleasing God. That's idolatry, self-righteousness, and ultimately slavery. Paul can observe the Sabbath and the Passover and other Jewish traditions, not because he needs to in order to secure his salvation, but because he already has it!

In the same way, our actions can either be *out* of worship, or they can try to replace it.

[Consider a scenario. Suzy is in junior high. She has come to understand that she has sinned against God and that this separates her from God. But she has also learned that she can have all her sins forgiven and washed away by believing and trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection. She does believe this and is so happy that she is a daughter of God and has the hope of being with Jesus forever one day. Suzy now so badly wants to be a part of sharing this good news with the kids at her church. So Suzy helps out in Sunday school where she sits with the kids and helps them listen to the Bible stories and opens snacks for them and things like that. But there's also Jason. Jason has been going to the same church forever. Jason has served in all kinds of areas. He's played on the music team, he's voted at all the meetings, he's served on the board, and everyone thinks highly of him. Jason is active in the church because in his heart he believes that if he does enough to serve, God will accept him and be happy with him. Sure Jason knows all about the gift of grace, but deep down it seems a little too good to be true and he needs to make sure he gets into heaven.]

One of those people acts out of worship to glorify God, the other acts out of idolatry and slavery and ultimately distains God. One of those people glories in the sacrifice of Jesus, the other declares in his heart that the sacrifice of Jesus was not enough.

The gospel does *not* call us to do better. The gospel calls us to come to the end of ourselves, realizing that we cannot please God on our own, and trust completely in the work of Christ. The gospel is about death and resurrection. We are called to die to ourselves, and our idolatrous mission to earn God's favour. We are called, by faith, to trust in Christ for new life in him.

This is why Paul labours for the church. If all that is produced from all of Paul's efforts is a group of people who act like better citizens, then his labour is in vain. If all he produces is a group of people who jump out of the slavery of pagan worship, into the slavery of religious legalism, then his labours are in vain.

Paul labours for new creations in Christ Jesus.

That's my heart for us as a church. That's my heart for you. I'm not interested in laboring so that you become better citizens or for you to do better at observing religions traditions. In the same way, I'm not laboring for your praise, or your money, or your service. I labour for one thing, that you would know Christ and him crucified, and thereby be transformed from slaves to children of God. I can't change your heart, that God's job, but I can hold out to you a bowl of stew, and life eternal in Christ Jesus, you chose. Don't look to anything else, what can only be found in Christ.