



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

LifeGroup Study

June 30, 2024

Galatians 2:19 – 3:4

Community

THEME FOR TODAY

Throughout Galatians we find themes of freedom. Charles Couson’s commentary on Galatians calls the first three chapters “Grace and the Liberating Authority of the Gospel,” claiming that our freedom is derived from the authority of the gospel. Beginning with the fourth chapter, Couson uses the title “Freedom and Adoption,” claiming that our freedom is derived from our adoption as sons and daughters. We are no longer slaves to the law, but free. In America, on the July 4th weekend, it is good to ask the question, “From where do we derive our freedom?”

In the lower 48 how fast would you drive down a highway that had no posted speed limit? What would inform your decision? The cross of Christ has removed all the speed limit signs on the road to salvation. We’re fully forgiven. God isn’t keeping score anymore. We are no longer slaves to the law or to sin. How, then, shall we live? That’s the question, the question of responsibility. Freedom doesn’t set us free from responsibility. Just ask a veteran. Just ask Jesus or Paul. Choosing how to live when you are truly free isn’t always easy. We need the wisdom of the Spirit and the community of faith.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

With freedom comes responsibility. Christianity is filled with paradoxes (seemingly contradictory statements that are true). “Freedom” is one of the great paradoxes of all time.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

We want to discover how we continue to live in legalism, and consider how we divide, judge, include and exclude based on our beliefs around moral, ethical and doctrinal issues. We want to move from living in legalism to living the way of love; free from the law but willingly bound to God’s law.

ICEBREAKER

Imagine that you encountered a speed limit sign that said “Go, ahead! You are free to drive any speed you choose!” How fast would you drive? Why? What factors would you have to consider? At what point would you know that you are driving too fast?

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, as we celebrate our freedom as a nation, remind us that freedom bears responsibility. We give you thanks that your love and forgiveness are free gifts of grace. Your love has set us free from fear and condemnation. Teach us how to love you and our neighbor. Make us your people who proclaim Christ in word and deed, and live out justice and peace in all the world. Amen.

Content

Paul establishes the theme of freedom in his introduction, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father ...” (1:3-4). We discern from the first two chapters that the Galatians have fallen prey to the Judaizers, who insist that people cannot be saved unless they keep the Jewish law. This false gospel apparently finds traction in the Galatian faith communities. Paul tells us that it even finds some traction in the apostolic community (2:11-14), demonstrating how difficult it is for former Jews to let go of the law.

After establishing his credentials as an apostle, Paul goes on to show the foolishness and danger of trying to cling to both the law and the gospel for salvation. Paul says that all must agree that all are sinners – not just the Gentiles – and all are justified by grace through faith in Christ (15-16).

Many of Paul’s letters are dictated, so sometimes ideas springboard to related issues. Apparently that’s what happens in 17. Paul responds to objections that might be raised by the Judaizers: “How can Paul claim that justification by faith is effective when Christians still sin?” Or, “If you have invalidated the importance of living by the law, how will you escape the charge that you are promoting sinful living? Doesn’t that make Christ the founder of an ineffective system, or at least one that’s less effective than the law? Shouldn’t the law be added for justification?”

According to the Judaizers, saying the law doesn’t matter is saying that standards and morality don’t matter. This leaves the door open for believers to live any way they choose. The freedom that the Gentiles possess in the gospel leads them to break some of the legal restrictions and thus, in the eyes of the Judaizers, to sin.

Of course, Paul did not mean that. If Jewish believers become justified in Christ, gain freedom from the law, and then commit a sin, does that mean Christ promotes sin? Paul’s reply is vehement. Absolutely not! Sin is not the result of people being justified; Christ is not responsible for promoting sin. All Christians – both Jews and Gentiles – sin, and that’s the very reason Christ died.

The Judaizers see justification as a “theological” excuse to get out from under Jewish law; to change from Jew to Christian. But Paul knows that, in addition to freedom from restrictive law, justification by faith demands lifestyle and behavioral changes. When God truly gets hold of a life, nothing can remain the same. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (*Read Galatians 2:19 – 3:4*).

Paul appeals to the Galatians’ knowledge that trying to obey the law has not brought assurance of justification. The legalists are doomed to failure, handicapped by the human tendency to sin even when they know better. But the group that Paul confronts adds a twist to the problem. If they agree about their inability to be justified by works of the law, then why does the law remain so important?

Having the law is a label of status and significance. Possession of God's own laws is a matter of great pride. Even if the laws are not obeyed, they are revered. It is also a way to stay in control, rather than living in the gospel's frightening freedom.

In 19-20 we see how Paul became free from the law: he died, and dead men are no longer under the law. Paul says that, when he was alive, he was convicted by the law and dead in sin. But having been crucified with Christ (through baptism, see Romans 6), Paul died and rose again. Now he lives a new life in Christ. The old Paul is dead, no longer legally liable. The new Paul, in Christ, is free from the law and loved unconditionally because of the price Christ paid. To return to the law would nullify the cross (21).

DISCUSSION Why did the Galatians return to the bondage and death of the law? Discuss the questions Paul asks the Galatians: Did you receive the Spirit by obeying the law or through faith (2)? If your new life in the Spirit started by faith, why would you try to continue the journey through works (3)?

Through both theology and experience, the Galatians should know that the way of legalism is the way of death. Faith in the gospel alone is the pathway to life.

Legalism, in the context of Galatians, means adding *anything* to "by grace through faith" in God's plan of salvation. In our context, "legalistic" is a label often slapped on a community that insists on lots of rules with which we disagree. Perhaps this only becomes legalism when there is an implication that God loves a Christian more or less based on behavior or doctrine, or when someone is judged in Christian community based on behavior or doctrine.

Reasons that some in the church live in legalism today include: boundary markers – we can identify who is in and who is out based on obedience or rebellion; control – self-righteousness puts us in control and stokes our pride; and fear – we have an instinctual need for boundaries, and grace has none.

DISCUSSION In what ways do we live in legalism? Give specific examples. If, through the gospel, we are truly set free, and God is no longer keeping score, how shall we live?

"A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none. A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."
– *Martin Luther*

DISCUSSION What does this quotation mean to you? Does the paradoxical nature of this idea bother you? How can we live with two seemingly opposite truths held in tension?

GOING DEEPER: 3 GOOD USES FOR THE LAW

First, the law reveals the will of God for our lives. Both the guidance of God's written word and our conscience direct us into pathways of blessing. Good parents set rules for their children to follow, not so that their children can earn their love, but for their safety. In the same way, our heavenly Father has set boundaries for us, not to earn God's love, but to keep us safe. These are pathways of blessing for us.

DISCUSSION Give examples of boundaries that are good for us.

Second, the law constrains our sinful desires. While God's grace makes us saints, we are still sinners. We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. The law constrains us the same way that a speed limit sign gives us a helpful limitation. Unlike the speed limit, we don't obey the law because we have to, because we're afraid God is going to write us an eternal ticket. Instead, by grace, God's Spirit shapes our hearts to *want* to obey the law.

DISCUSSION Talk about how the Holy Spirit shapes our hearts to want to obey the law.

Finally, the law reminds us how dependent we are upon the grace of God. When we honestly hold our lives up to the perfect law of God, we realize again and again just how far short we fall. We sin in thought, word and deed, in big and small ways. No matter how hard we try to do the right thing, sin always gets the best of us, which only serves to drive us to our knees and drive us more deeply into the unconditional love of God revealed in the cross of Christ.

DISCUSSION Talk about a time when you became clearly aware of your own failings and shortcomings.

Application

—We've been set free for a life of loving God and loving our neighbor. We've been set free to proclaim Christ in word and deed, and to live out justice and peace in all the world. In the light of what we've shared as a group, how can we live differently this week?

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord God, your unconditional love for us is revealed in the cross of Christ. Your love sets us free from the law, and our loving response is to willingly bind ourselves to your law. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ have changed everything. We are a new people living as your new creation. Send us into this week as your people who handle our freedom responsibly. Amen!

ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

Do Not Grow Weary in Well Doing

Galatians 6:7-10

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Staying close to Christ and living the Christian life requires diligence. If we sow to the sinful part of our natures, we create destructive fruit in our lives. If we sow to the Spirit in our lives, we reap life now and eternal life in heaven. This does not guarantee an easy life, but it does keep us grounded in God's grace, connected to the wonderful fruits of God's Spirit, and living a purposeful life directed towards God's work in the world. Think about what you are sowing. If you are sowing to good things, be encouraged to keep doing that. If you are sowing to sinful things, ask God to help you turn the tide in that part of your life.

Galatians 2:19-3:4 NLT For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. (20) My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (21) I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die. Galatians 3:1-4 NLT Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. (2) Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. (3) How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? (4) Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it?