

Along the Way

“True Freedom”

INTRODUCTION

Every July we take a day to celebrate our freedoms as Americans. We remember that moment long ago, when in the face of tyranny, we declared our independence and affirmed human equality. These were and are noble ideals.

But if we're honest, we'd probably admit that the noble idea of human freedom can easily devolve into a spirit of selfishness. The ideal of freedom becomes "I'll do whatever I want to, and you can't stop me." Is that what we mean when we talk about freedom?

What would happen then if we went looking for the truest and best picture of freedom that we can find? What if we looked further back even than the founding of our nation, back to the days of the Bible? You might not know it but the book of Galatians is all about freedom. Paul describes it in great detail to the Christians of Galatia, but his definition holds value not only for people back then, but for us today as well. Join us as we take a look.

KEY VERSE

"Jesus gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age." – Galatians 1:4

LESSONS IN OUR SERIES

The church in Galatia can appear quite foreign to us at first glance. We know nothing of deep divisions over the issue of circumcision. They were a small, relatively unknown sect; we are in the mainstream of Christianity.

But as we look below the surface, we find that we share many of the same challenges of Christians living 2000 years ago. Like us, they were living out their Christian calling in the midst of a culture that cared little for such things. To follow Christ meant to live out theological and ethical imperatives that were anything but mainstream. Internal and external pressures to fit in – to the idolatrous culture around them or to the Jewish community from which they came – made discipleship a daily challenge. Paul's letter gives them, and us, encouragement for living out of our faith in a world that holds different values. The lessons for this series underscore the truths that:

- We need the Spirit to live the Christian Life
- We need Community to live the Christian Life
- The Christian Life should be Transformational

Along the Way
July 13th Teacher's Guide
Galatians 5:16-26 – “The Freedom of a Follower”

We need the Spirit to live the Christian Life

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

READ Galatians 5:16-26

Major Teaching Points to Communicate:

1. You are not alone. You have the Holy Spirit
2. The Holy Spirit sets us free by changing our heart so that we want to do the right thing. (This is the opposite of rules imposed from the outside to make us do the right thing.)

How important is the Holy Spirit to you?

How deeply do you need the Holy Spirit?

Jesus chose twelve apostles to be with him as he lived his life here on earth. They grew to trust in him and to be dependent upon him. They could not imagine living without him. But as his death was approaching, he told them that he was leaving. Yet they would not be alone. He would not leave them as orphans. As he had lived side-by-side with them, the Spirit would be intimately involved in their lives. Through the Spirit he would still be with them. Even more intimately, he would be *in* them.

John 14:16-20 (NIV):

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”

An orphan in Biblical times was powerless and helpless. They were alone.

We are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit.

SOME CHURCHES LEAVE THE HOLY SPIRIT OUT

Some of the people at the Galatian churches were going back to a type of Christianity that focused on rules and regulations. They thought they just needed to try harder.

Have you ever been part of a church that seemed to be all rules and regulations?

If you followed all the rules you were a good Christian. Or were you?

Did you ever feel that you measured up?

Was there any sense of freedom?

Did you feel crushed or oppressed?

Did you have your own list?

Did you feel that you were a failure if you could not check off everything on your list? (Did I pray enough? Did I read the Bible enough? Did you feel guilty if you missed church on a Sunday morning?)

This is legalism. This approach believes that rules imposed from the outside can make people do what is right. This is the old covenant.

IN SOME CHURCHES, THE HOLY SPIRIT SETS PEOPLE FREE

Paul wanted the churches in Galatia to live by the Spirit and to walk in the Spirit.

How do we become slaves to those things that are contrary to the Spirit (v.17)?

How do the acts of the flesh that Paul lists in v.19-21 keep us from experiencing the kingdom of God? How are the lives of men and women tyrannized by some of these things? Jealousy? Envy? Idolatry? Drunkenness?

There is a fundamental incompatibility between the life determined by the flesh and life in the reign of God. What makes the flesh so destructive is that it can become the norm by which people's lives are lived. It demands all of their energy and attention. There is no openness to God's activity, to the presence of the Spirit, to the life of the new age of the kingdom of God.

How does the Holy Spirit help us to live the Christian life?

He sets us free from the inside out.

What does that mean? What does that look like?

God makes possible the very life that he demands. The Spirit changes our heart so that we want to do the right thing. This is the new covenant. This is the greatest freedom of all.

WHAT CHANGES HAS THE HOLY SPIRIT BROUGHT ABOUT IN YOUR LIFE?

How has the Holy Spirit changed you?

How has he changed your attitudes?

How has he changed habits?

How has he changed your goals in life?

How has he changed how you see other people?

How has he helped you produce the fruit of the Spirit— love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

How has he made you a new person?

HOW DO WE COOPERATE WITH THE SPIRIT'S WORK IN OUR LIVES?

Everyone sees the need for right behavior. Some seek to achieve this by enforcing a mountain of religious rules. Paul recommended that we follow the Spirit. He will bear his fruit through us. We are not perfect. We still have struggles. But the Spirit will help us if we let him.

Along the Way
July 20th Teacher's Guide
Galatians 6:1-10 – “The Freedom of a Servant”

We need Community to live the Christian Life

COMMUNITY

The early church was on fire with the spirit of God and committed to a life of devotion to God and to each other. Their level of commitment attracted thousands and became the catalyst for the Church as we know it today. Everything was shared and the churches became true communities with every member fully embracing the love of God and sharing that love with their brothers and sisters. As the gospel spread and the number of churches grew, it is clear that different interpretations, different agendas, and dissention began to creep in. Paul spent most of his life after the Damascus Road conversion building and correcting the new churches. His message was consistent, God loves everyone, we are saved from our sins through the life and death of Jesus, and we all have a personal and community responsibility to stay connected to God and our community. His letters are filled with love and concern that the churches stay true to the good news of Christ and that every person in the new communities work to strengthen each other's faith and love for one another.

GALATIANS

Paul wrote the letter to the churches in Galatia to address the issue that the Jewish Christians (Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah) were having with the Gentile converts. Although accepting Gentiles into the church, they were requiring them to be strict followers of Jewish law, including eating habits, daily rituals, and circumcision. Paul's message corrected that blind slavery to the letter of the law and embraced the spirit of God's law. He also made it clear that the freedom that comes from the cross and our faith in God, comes also with a responsibility to keep ourselves closely connected to God and to serve (not be a slave to) our neighbor. It is from the work of the Holy Spirit that we live and breathe and have our meaning – it is not a legalistic act.

In today's text, Galatians 6:1-10, Paul is telling the churches how to love and correct each other and how to live in a community that embraces the work of the spirit. He is asking them to become and help others to become fully devoted followers of Christ.

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

READ Galatians 6:1-10

Today's text requires the full context of the letter to the Galatians for complete understanding. It is suggested that teachers read the book of Galatians to get the full breadth of Paul's message so that the early verses of Chapter 6 do not read like a directive to go around pointing fingers, taking names, and kicking butt. This is a letter of love, freedom, and a challenge to each and everyone of us to correct with love, encourage, nurture, and build up.

The Student Lesson expands on four of the points included in the text for today. As you read the text in the context of the entire book, see where the spirit speaks to you. What jumps out at you and speaks to our role in the Christian community. Ask the class to identify what they hear from the scripture. Use the following themes, taken from the Learner's Guide, as examples of key points in Paul's message.

Gentle Restoration

How do we restore gently. What does that mean and what does it look like. A good starting point is to think about raising children and the actions that we took to correct and teach. As we accept the responsibility to help each other to see and live the truth, how do we make it clear that we do this from a position of love. We are not trying to break a spirit but increase the influence of spirit.

Carrying Other's Burdens

How do we embrace our own imperfections, wrong turns, and times of doubt, confusion, and pain? Do we reach out to others for sympathy, empathy, comfort, and advice, or do we hide our weaknesses? Is so, why?

How can we reach out to others when we see them struggle, lose spirit, and move away from God? How can we be the type of friend that lovingly embraces, actively suffers with them, and provides support and guidance that restores?

Examining Our Actions

Paul was very aware that we can be tempted to adopt new and trendy philosophies and beliefs if enough people around us do the same. He was also aware that we can be very proud and self glorifying individuals as Christians. He challenges us to be on guard against such thoughts and beliefs. What does it mean to examine and test our thoughts and actions. When we correct do we do it out of love or sense of superiority?

Doing Good To All People

Paul was so filled with the Holy Spirit and so committed to help others understand the complete love and saving grace of Jesus. He was called to share that message to one and all – no exclusions. We are challenged to do good to all people, Christian and non-Christian, believers that are fully devoted followers, and believers that stray or fall away from God. How do we do that and what personal challenges do we have in reaching out? With what type of person or groups of people do we find it more difficult to live out this directive?

Conclusion

Close with a prayer for our community and the common goal of becoming and helping others to become fully devoted followers of Christ.

RESOURCES

Alcoholics Anonymous.

Use this as an example or identify other groups that really embrace the individual and group responsibility to help each other. In AA, its members honestly share their struggles and provide a network of support for each other as they attempt to live a life of sobriety. Everyone is accepted, challenged, corrected, supported, and celebrated. What lessons can we learn from such groups?

The Good and Beautiful Community. Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, and Demonstrating Love, by James Bryan Smith.

This is a great book about living out our faith and growing our faith in the context of community. A quote from the book reads,

“Apprentices of Jesus are not part-time do-gooders. They live in continuous contact with the kingdom of God, and are constantly men and women in whom Christ dwells .”

Along the Way
July 27th Teacher's Guide
Galatians 6:11-16 – “New Creations”

The Christian life should be Transformational

TRANSFORMATION

“As long as they remain ‘merely religious,’ Christians can stay on good terms with the world.”

But that is not the transformation that Jesus calls us to and that the Spirit promises to work in us.

In an old cartoon, a butterfly driving a car is stopped by a police officer. When asked for his ID, the butterfly produces a driver's license with a picture of a caterpillar on it. “Sorry, it's an old picture,” he says.

Have we been transformed? Are we being transformed?

GALATIANS

The Apostle Paul sums up his gospel message to the Galatians reaffirming that the truth of the gospel is - the gospel is of God's grace. Both Jew and Gentile are free from the bondage of observance of the law (circumcision) for it is by a believer's faith in Jesus Christ that believers are saved and restored to a right relationship with God. It is by faith alone and not by law-keeping that believers are forgiven sin, redeemed by God and given eternal life.

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

READ Galatians 6:11-16.

Image of God

In faith, we believe God made the ultimate sacrifice for us in the death of Jesus on the cross.

How does this knowledge about God and His great gift to us affect our image of God?

Name some characteristics you believe describe God.

Explore how one's image of God impacts his relationship with God.

(a punishing God / a loving God / a distant God)

Becoming More like Christ is a Progressive Work

2 Corinthians 3: 17-18 and John 14: 15-16 are quoted in the Student Lesson.

Expand on ways we can work in harmony with the Holy Spirit to become more like Christ's spirit.

List characteristics of a Christ-like spirit.

What efforts can we make to become more and more like Christ?

Discuss disciplines of prayer, worship or study and give examples of how practicing that discipline might help us open ourselves to God's transforming power of love. (A good resource is the *Along the Way* booklet -"Cultivating a Life that Bears Fruit," Fall, 2012)

Our Daily Life

In what ways might our belief that we were created in God's image affect our relationships?

How might this awareness of being God's workmanship affect our devotion to God?