

PLEASING PEOPLE OR PLEASING GOD?

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

The central theme of Galatians is this: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1). In the last message (Discovery Paper 4681) we considered the greeting of the letter (1:1-5), which culminates in the announcement that by the will of God the Father, Jesus God’s Son shed his blood for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. God has not called us to live a life of cramped, tangled, and self-conscious slavery, concerned more about others than we are about him, living out a life of burdened accomplishment. We must take our freedom seriously and stand firm in it.

The series title *Freedom Fighters* is suggested by the nature of the book of Galatians. It is really a military document in many respects. It calls slaves now freed to insist on their freedom, and to pass it on to others. It requires focus, alertness, engagement. There are references throughout the book to curses, spies, scars, wounds. There is a description in chapter 2 of tension between the senior officers in the corps. At another point Paul is burdened to raise the low morale among his troops. He writes in 4:15, “Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?” The book unmasks the false propaganda of the enemy. It calls the troops to lift up fallen comrades who have buckled under the pressure and help them stand on their feet again.

It should be obvious that this battle is not one that is fought with swords and arms. It is a spiritual battle, one fought with prayer and persuasion, speaking the truth in love. It is serious, nonetheless. The issues at stake are critically important.

So now in Galatians 1:6-10 we are going to be urged forward in defending our freedom, taking a stand for it:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

An abandonment of the true faith

Galatians stands out among Paul’s letters at this point. The usual pattern of the apostle is to identify the sender and the recipients, offer a word of grace, and give a positive word of encouragement to his readers. In this letter the encouraging note is conspicuously absent. Verse 6 begins in very strong language (paraphrased): “Have you lost your minds? I’m dumfounded by the behavior that’s taking place in Galatia! You’ve deserted the Lord God himself, who bought you with the precious blood of his Son!” Accusing a soldier of deserting the corps in battle is a very serious thing. And that is exactly the language Paul uses here. “You are deserters. You have turned your back on the Lord himself!”

From verse 6 he goes on to interpret the problem. It is a religious problem—another gospel, some other version of the Jesus story. They have abandoned Christ—not to go off into murder, theft, or a life of debauchery, but rather to pursue a religious alternative, “another gospel.” The devilish claim is that there is a refined, superior, advanced form of the gospel.

However, there is no such thing as another gospel! There is only one message of hope. There is no other way to know God, no other Savior, and no other version of Jesus’ saving work. If the Galatians believe the claim of a refined, superior gospel, they have deserted the Lord. This so-called superior gospel is a distortion of the truth.

That is why Paul is so passionate and so thoroughly upset with his friends in Galatia. And he’s even more upset with the teachers who persuaded them. “Let [them] be accursed!” He declares that those who have distorted the gospel should go to hell. They should be accursed—cut off from God.

Paul is willing to condemn even himself if necessary. “Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary . . . let him be accursed.” It doesn’t matter what their credentials are, how highly regarded or well spoken of they are. It doesn’t matter where these deceivers come from. If they distort the gospel, let them be accursed.

It will be helpful at this point to consider the psychology behind this false gospel. What was this religious distortion, this lie that was being told, that is so condemned? We don’t have a lot of information this early in the book, but we do get clues farther on in Galatians.

In 3:1 Paul yells, “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”

In the question “Did you receive the Spirit?” Paul is gathering up all of the introductory truth of coming to Christ: Were you born again? Were your sins forgiven? Were you placed into Christ? Were you given hope for eternity? Did the reality of Christian identity, the knowledge of God, peace, joy, hope, enter your experience? If so, was it because of something you did? Or was it because you heard the extraordinary message that God loved you so much that Christ was crucified for you—a hearing that resulted in a transformed heart?

The answer to that is obvious. But an important question follows in 3:3: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” That is, having entered into life in Christ, are *you* now going to take the ball and try to attain your goal by human effort? “*I’m* now going to remake myself—reform myself, discipline myself, make myself all that I am to be.” That’s foolish! Why would the beginning be filled with faith and the growth be filled with self-effort? It makes no sense.

But this was the line of the gospel-distorters: “The death of Jesus on the cross is a positive entry-level truth, and of course you ought to be grateful that he died for your sins. But now that you’re launched on this program, it’s up to you. If you do better, people will admire you. You can out-perform the folks around you and rise in the estimation of God and angels.” Paul calls this a desertion of Christ.

Let me ask you to imagine some people standing in front of you. The first is an adolescent looking for a place in the world, trying to figure out what life is like. This young person sees in a group of other young people authenticity, community, and acceptance, and having seen that, he asks, “Where do such things come from?” He finds that the love of God is at the heart of the authentic community that he sees, and he realizes that God loves him. This describes me, by the way, in 1964. “Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” to me. I heard and believed that truth, and everything changed.

Standing next to the adolescent is an adult who had been defeated by repeated failure, a slave to dark habits for years. But to him “Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” The love of God on the cross of Christ was made clear to him, and he now sings with conviction the familiar words:

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me! (1)*

Next to him is a terrified soul who had not known a day that was not filled with anxieties and fear. Before her “Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” A powerful Protector claimed her, and he will calm those fears.

And over here is a renegade from a narrow, restrictive, and shallow church. This person had asked questions nobody ever took seriously enough to answer, and had been offered platitudes in place of truth. She had walked away from the church years ago. Then “Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” to her, and she found following Jesus to be an adventure—a life filled to the brim with everything she had ever hoped for.

The last person presented to our imaginations is a successful competitor. He has great wealth, “the most toys.” But he had been dying of destination sickness. Then he found peace with God that cost him nothing because “Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” for him.

How did you get started? How did your life change? How did you become the home of the Holy Spirit? Was it because of something you did, or because you discovered news so good it was breathtaking, and you believed it? Again, the answer is obvious.

A subtle switch in allegiance

But then what happens? We realize we have entered a new country. We once did not belong but now we do. And the new country has many others in it, our fellow citizens. We look around and want to be accepted, to fit in, to be highly regarded by the people in this new country. There’s a new “in crowd” of respected people. There’s a new defining behavior. There’s new jargon, new taste in music we’re supposed to acquire, new cultural interests, new names to be dropped, new jokes, a new kind of banter and talk and look. We’re desperate to fit in, but many of our old skills don’t work any more.

I remember in 1964 when I first became a Christian. As I mentioned, it was in the context of a community of other adolescents, and most of them had gone to a camp the previous summer. They were talking about it:

“Wasn’t the speaker great?”

“And the food was great!”

“And the place was so beautiful!”

I felt so out of it because I hadn’t been to the camp. But eventually I just started to nod my head, “Oh yeah,” “Uh-huh,” not exactly saying that I remembered those things but acting as though I hadn’t missed out on such a crucial experience that everybody else got to be a part of. They all had a particular kind of New Testament, so I rushed right out and bought one. Only theirs had underlining in it, and—this is true!—I got out a marking pen and started underlining stuff. I had no idea what I was doing, but I wanted my Bible to look underlined because everybody else’s was underlined. I wanted to fit in and be like everybody else.

There is humor in this, and probably some of this kind of behavior is inevitable. Acting immature when you are immature is unavoidable. But it is foolish. And if we persist, it is desertion.

The ones who should be condemned, Paul says, are those who prey on vulnerable, young Christians. Peddlers of pride disguised as religion should be cursed. That's the argument of this second paragraph of chapter 1.

Looking good or serving God

Now, the difference between the first-century church and the church today is this: there was no evangelical subculture when this book was written. There wasn't a widely accepted, so-called Christian version of what you were supposed to do or not do. The church was way too young, especially the church in the Gentile world. Remember, this is one of the very earliest New-Testament documents to be written. What was widely accepted, though, was the reality of Judaism as the root from which Christianity had grown. Judaism became the source of nuance and style. The look of Judaism became the badge that was most sought after. And after Paul left Galatia, false teachers came saying, "If you really want to be in the inner circle and please God and look good, then you should become Jewish. What prayers did Jesus pray? Jewish prayers. What songs did he sing? The psalms of David. What covenant did he grow up under? The covenant given to Abraham, Moses, and David. You want to know what really makes God happy? It's for you to become Jewish as Jesus was Jewish, as the first Christians were Jewish."

That's why the book of Galatians is about such things as circumcision, dietary laws, and as Paul says in 4:10, "observ[ing] days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain." Today we aren't so concerned about circumcision, because the status symbols are different. But the Galatians were embarrassed about where they had come from. They had been rank pagans. They had worshiped idols. They didn't have any of the refinements of those who knew Hebrew and could break into a prayer at a moment's notice. "I don't know any of those great prayers! I'm just kind of a boorish, out-of-it, idol-worshiping pagan. I'm now in the new country, but I don't know any of the cool stuff! So why shouldn't I be circumcised? Why shouldn't I learn all the dietary laws, the nuances of what cup to use and when to eat and not to eat? I want to rise above the other Gentile newcomers around me...."

So Paul yells at them, "What in the world are you doing? If you are circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. If you imagine that pleasing the people who say what God cares about is going to advance you to any degree, then you have robbed the cross of its power, you have deserted the Lord. And I won't have it. And anybody who says such things should go to hell!"

How might you experience this kind of problem? Well, consider your prayer life, for example. Do you pray so that you can make subtle references to how often or how deeply or how beautifully you pray? Or do you pray seeking God? Do you use your spiritual gifts so you'll be known as a strong and capable leader who works hard at the things of God? Or do you use your spiritual gifts because it's a privilege to be able to serve God? Are you generous in order to be known as a generous person or because you love Christ and his kingdom? You either please God or please people. One of these is a response to the gospel and the other to a distortion of the gospel.

Are you a fighter for freedom, or has religion gotten to the point in your life that it has you as much enslaved as you were before you knew Christ? Do you delight to seek out God, live for him, and enjoy his approval? Or has something else taken his place?

George Beverly Shea, an associate of Billy Graham for many years, is probably best known for a song of quite simple lyrics. They tell a truth that is at the heart at what Paul is arguing for and is at the heart of the gospel.

Verse 2:

*I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause,
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame,
I'd rather be true to His holy name
Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway;
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today. (2)*

Do these words speak truly of us?

NOTES

1. John Newton. *Amazing Grace*.
2. Rhea F. Miller. *I'd Rather Have Jesus*. © 1922, 1950 Chancel Music, Inc.

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