

SET FREE FOR LOVING SERVICE

(Studies in Galatians)

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On January 23, 1968, the U.S.S. Pueblo, a naval intelligence gathering ship, was captured off the coast of North Korea. Of the 83 crewmen, 82 survived and they were imprisoned for 11 months. During their captivity, the crew members were brutally beaten and tortured. In one particular instance, 13 of the men were required to sit in a rigid manner around a table for hours. After several hours, the door was violently flung open and a North Korean guard viciously beat the man in the first chair with the butt of his rifle. The next day, as each man sat at his assigned place, again the door was thrown open and the man in the first chair was brutally beaten. On the third day, it happened again to the same man. Knowing the man could not survive, another young sailor took his place. When the door was flung open the guard automatically beat the new victim senseless. For weeks, each day a new man stepped forward to sit in that horrible chair, knowing full well what would happen. At last the guards gave up in exasperation. They were unable to defeat that kind of sacrificial love which the crew members had for one another.

Julian the Apostate, as he came to be called, became emperor of Rome in 361 A.D. He hoped to strengthen the Roman Empire by restoring the traditional religion. And so, he repaired and reopened temples to the old classical gods in order to encourage people to return to the ancient forms of worship. He had the pagan religion taught in the empire's schools and he wrote treatises defending it. Julian sought to reverse the inroads Christianity had made within the empire. Although he did not openly persecute Christians, he tried to make life difficult for them. He ended all the legal and financial privileges that previous emperors had given to Christians, and he took opportunity to reward apostasy. His most famous work, *Against the Galileans*, was an attack on

Christianity. He died while leading an unsuccessful war against Persia in 363 A.D. Now, I would like to read from one of the letters that Julian wrote to Arsacius, the high priest of Galatia.

It is not sufficient that you are unblamable yourself; all the priests in Galatia ought to be so likewise. I will therefore that you persuade, and even compel, all the priests in Galatia to live soberly; otherwise do you depose them from the priestly office, unless they and their wives and children and servants do religiously worship the gods; and also forbear to converse with the servants, children and wives of the Galileans, who are impious towards the gods, and prefer impiety to religion. You are likewise to order them not to frequent the theater, nor to drink in taverns, nor to exercise any mean or sordid employments. Such as harken to your directions, you are to encourage; others you are to reject. You are also to erect hospitals in every city, that strangers also may share in our humanity; and not only those of our religion, but others likewise, if they are in need. [Julian then tells Arsacius what allowances he had made for this task. He then goes on to say,] For it is a shame, when there are no beggars among the Jews, and the impious Galileans relieve not only their own people, but ours also, that our poor should be neglected by us, and be left helpless and destitute.

Do you hear what Julian is saying? He is saying that if the Roman religion is going to defeat the Christian religion, then the Roman pagans are going to have to *out-live* and *out-love* the Christians. The impious Galileans are making the Roman pagans look bad!

Lucian, a Greek writer who lived from 120 to probably 200 A.D., was a pagan. Here is his reaction upon observing the fellowship of Christians:

It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they are brethren.

Tertullian, who lived from 155 to 222 A.D., was the first major Christian writer in Latin. Listen to these words of his as he describes Christians:

It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. "Look!" they say. "How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another."

I have told you love stories. Granted, none of them sound like the typical "love story": there is nothing romantic about any of them. The first story, the U.S.S. Pueblo, was taken from the secular world; in fact, taken from the military world. The other stories were a journey back in time to the early church after the period of time described in our New Testament. Of course, the grandest and greatest "love story" of them all is

found in that book we call the New Testament. It is the story of Jesus Christ who was crucified on Calvary for you and for me.

We have been studying Paul's letter to the Galatians. The thrust of his argument in this letter is this: by giving Himself up to death, Christ has set His people free. They are now summoned by God to live, by the power of the Spirit, in a free life of loving service. It is this "free life of loving service" that we want to explore in this lesson. Someone has observed, "Love is the only service that power cannot command and money cannot buy."

In Galatians chapter 4, verses 21-31, Paul gives us a somewhat complex allegory about Hagar and Sarah and their respective children. Now, while his allegory may be a bit confusing—it is to me, at least—his conclusion is crystal clear: v. 31— "So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman." This leads naturally into 5:1 where Paul wraps-up this particular argument and also sets the stage for what follows. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." In 5:15, we see that the Galatians are deeply divided and are at odds with one another. Each one is more concerned with his or her own welfare than with the needs of the community. Now, let's read 5:2-15.

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another (5:2-15, NRSV).

In Galatians, the word “love” (ἀγάπη / ἀγαπάω 5:14) occurs in 5:6, 13, 14, & 22.

Let’s put these verses together.

The only thing that counts is faith working through *love*. . . . Through *love* become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself.” . . . The fruit of the Spirit is *love* . . .

The intent or the basic aim of the Mosaic Law was to produce a unified people of God, unified on the basis of love for the one true God and love for one another. This is still the will of God for the people of God! The essence of the law is fulfilled in the community of Christ, not because the law continues to be the rule for the Christian’s behavior and not by the Christian submitting to the law. Rather, this fulfillment is what happens quite naturally when Christians follow the example and teaching of Christ. As Paul states it in 6:2, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” When we live the free life of loving service, we fulfill the law of Christ.

There is a difference between “doing” the law and “fulfilling” the law. To fulfill the law means to completely satisfy what is required. Love completely satisfies the requirements of the law because it is a gift of the Spirit, accomplished through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, doing the law can never fulfill the law, because the works of the law are simply inadequate. Paul has already maintained in 2:21, “If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” Allow me to distort this verse just a little. “If doing the law could fulfill the law, then Christ died for nothing!”

Now, if we think about it, this all makes perfectly good sense. We realize that a person can do the law without fulfilling the law. We call such a person a hypocrite. They do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. But setting hypocrisy to the side, such a person may be a legalist. A legalist is someone who does the law—in fact, he or she dots every “i” and crosses every “t”—they do the law but they do not fulfill the law. A legalist believes that it is the doing of the law that fulfills the law. A legalist believes, “If I do all the right things, then I must be right.” But the problem is, we are not capable of always doing the right thing. To use a baseball analogy, if I must bat .1000 to win, then I already know that I’m going to lose. I can’t get a hit every time.

As Christians, we have been set free for loving service. Surveys have shown that perhaps no value is more highly prized by those who live in the Western World than

freedom. Usually what is meant by freedom is something very different from what Paul has in mind in Galatians. In the modern world, freedom usually means freedom to do as one pleases, freedom to live as one pleases, freedom to be left alone, freedom to be an individual without having to worry about encumbering laws or requirements or stipulations. In other words, freedom is defined in a very individualistic and very selfish way in our culture. What underlies this is the fundamental assumption that individual identity is more primary and more important than community identity.

Paul, however, paints a very different picture of freedom. In his view, the only true freedom to be had is freedom in Christ, freedom that comes with the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. Freedom from sin, not freedom for sin, is what Paul has in mind. Freedom to serve others, not freedom from others, is his point. Paul is suggesting that what the world calls freedom is just another form of slavery. This vision of freedom in Christ still challenges us today to learn more fully that true freedom comes in the service of love to one another.

Are you free? That may sound like a silly question to ask an American audience. But it just may be that we individualistic Americans are among the most enslaved people on the face of the earth. Far too often, we are held captive by our own wishes and wants, by our own whims and ways. Are you free? Even in the church, like the Galatian Christians, we are enslaved by those who would lead us to believe that we can be right with God if we rightly keep all the rules. If we can just do church right, if we can just do worship right, then we will be right with God. Legalism has no room for grace. In fact, it fears grace. Are you free? Is there anyone that you cannot love? If so, then you are not free. Is there any brother or sister in Christ that you cannot serve? If so, then you are not free. Is there a sin in your life that you are not willing to submit to the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit? If so, then you are not free.

I began this lesson with love stories, and that is where I want to end this lesson. A number of years ago, when I was preaching full-time for the first time, I was working with a rural congregation that was situated in a county saturated with Churches of Christ. There was considerable external pressure on me and my congregation to conform to what the county brotherhood thought was sound doctrine and sound practice. I must confess that I have never been a very good conformist. It seems I have always butted heads with

those who want to do my thinking for me. And so, from time to time, my bulletin articles were ridiculed in other congregations and held-up as exhibits of blasphemous liberalism and heresy. On occasion, I was shunned in public places by fellow Christians of other congregations. Often, I was not given the courtesy of a straight answer, but was the subject of rumors. I felt branded with “the scarlet letter”—“L” for liberal. I sought advice from a teacher of mine in graduate school. I chose this teacher for two reasons: I respected the spirituality of his life and he had grown-up in the county where I was ministering. I saw him as someone who both knew Christ and knew my situation. The words that he spoke to me would affect my ministry in a way that I had never imagined. Speaking about those fellow Christians with whom I was having problems and who I thought were persecuting me, he said, “Royce, you look them right in the eye and you say, ‘I love you, and there is nothing that you can do to make me stop.’ And then, you love them, no matter what.”

Since that day, that is what I have sought to do. No, I have not been perfect in this endeavor, but I have been persistent in it. I want to love others as Jesus loves me. And while I pray that the Spirit of God will always keep me humble, I have no fear of the self-appointed judges within our brotherhood. And while there may be preachers who will never come and hear me preach, I can go and hear them preach. And while there may be Christians who find themselves unable to worship with me, I am able to worship with them. And while there may be brothers and sisters in Christ who cannot greet me with love, I can greet them with love and pray that God will bless them. I ask you, Who is free? Who is free? The answer: *I am free!* Love has set me free and I have been set free to love. I cannot make you accept me, but you cannot make me reject you. I cannot make you fellowship me, but you cannot make me disfellowship you. I cannot make you love me, but you cannot make me stop loving you.

Calvin Miller has written a trilogy of books in which he retells the story of the New Testament in a poetic and metaphorical way. The first book, *The Singer*, is the story of the Gospels. Jesus is the singer and His song is the good news of God’s redeeming love. Of course, Jesus has competition. Satan, called the world-hater, also sings his song. His song is seductive and deceptive—it appears to be a love song but it is really a song of hate. The excerpt I am going to read to you concerns Jesus meeting a woman who is engaged

in the business of selling herself. In the story, the word “betrothed” is used several times. The word “betrothed” means “to be promised or pledged to someone in marriage”—“to be engaged to be married.” Listen as I read.

He met a woman in the street. She leaned against an open door and sang through her half-parted lips a song that he could barely hear. He knew her friendship was for hire. She was without a doubt a study in desire. Her hair fell free around her shoulders. And intrigue played upon her lips.

“Are you betrothed?” she asked.

“No, only loved,” he answered.

“And do you pay for love?”

“No, but I owe it everything.”

“You are alone. Could I sell you but an hour of friendship?”

Deaf to her surface proposition, he said, “Tell me of the song that you were singing as I came upon you. Where did you learn it?”

His question troubled her. At length she said, “The first night that I ever sold myself, I learned it from a tall impressive man.”

“And did he play a silver pipe?” the Singer asked.

She seemed surprised. “Do you know the man who bought me first?”

“Yes. Not long ago, in fact, he did his best to teach that song to me.”

“I cannot understand. I sell friendship and you your melody. Why would he teach us both the self-same song?”

The Singer pitied her. He knew the World Hater had a way of making every victim feel as though he were the only person who could sing his song.

“He only has one song; he therefore teaches it to everyone. It is a song of hate.”

“No, it is a love song. The first night that he held me close, he sang it tenderly and so in every way he owned me while he sang to me of love.”

“And have you seen him since?”

“No, not him, but a never ending queue of men with his desires.”

“So it was no song of love. Tell me, did he also say that some day in the merchandising of your soul, you would find someone who would not simply leave his fee upon the stand but rather take you home to care for you and cherish you?”

Again she seemed surprised, “Those were indeed his very words—how can you know them?”

“And have you found the one that he has promised?”

“Not yet.”

“And how long have you peddled friendship?”

“Some twenty years are gone since first I learned the song that you inquired about.”

The Singer felt a burst of pity. “We sometimes give ourselves to hate in masquerade and only think it love. And all our lives we sing the song we thought was right. The Canyon of the Damned is filled with singers who thought they knew a love song . . . Listen while I sing for you a song of love.”

He began the melody so vital to the dying men around him. “In the beginning was the song of love . . .”

She listened and knew for the first time she was hearing all of love there was. Her eyes swam when he was finished. She sobbed and sobbed in shame. “Forgive me, Father-Spirit, for I am sinful and undone . . . for singing weary years of all the wrong words . . .”

The Singer touched her shoulder and told her of the joy that lay ahead if she could learn the music he had sung.

He left her in the street and walked away, and as he left he heard her singing his new song. And when he turned to wave the final time he saw her shaking her head to a friendship buyer. She would not take his money.

And from his little distance, the Singer heard her use his very words.

“Are you betrothed?” the buyer asked her.

“No, only loved,” she answered.

“And do you pay for love?”

“No, but I owe it everything” (pp. 62-66).

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