



Week 5: Freedom from Slavery

Read Galatians 4:1 – 5:4

This lesson is about three things:

- 1) Paul's analogies and allegories regarding slavery and the Law
- 2) Paul's personal appeal to the Galatians
- 3) Our own struggles with slavery

I once did a group training exercise in which the facilitator asked us to reflect on our triggers, the things that others do or say that really punch our buttons, and elicit in us a dramatically negative response. The point of the exercise was for us to learn how NOT to approach each of our colleagues or teammates. It also served another hidden purpose; it taught us how to approach our colleagues if our aim was to get a rise out of them.

Paul's primary audience is the Gentile Christians in Galatia, but his secondary audience are those teachers in Galatia and in Antioch, his home church, who are teaching a conversion to Judaism as a part of participation in the Christian community there. And for these Jewish Christians, there was one thing that their culture could not tolerate—being called a slave. The whole narrative of the Torah and the Prophets was a narrative of being set free from slavery, and the forces of evil that continued to take them back – first the Egyptians, then the Assyrians and Babylonians and Persians ... all seeking to hold the people of Israel in slavery. God had set them free from that slavery, and they would not, will not, go back there. Even today, as soldiers in Israel are sworn in on the top of Masada, their vow and slogan is “Never Again!” Never again will Israel be captives or slaves. Never again will Israel not be free. Paul has chosen a motif designed to stir the pot, and provoke real change in the young churches in Galatia.

Review

Beginning with chapter 2, verse 15 and concluding with chapter 5, verse 6, Paul makes his argument that righteousness – being right with God – comes only by grace through faith. Let's review where we are in Paul's argument:

- 1) Abraham was made right with God by faith: *Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.* (Genesis 15:6)
- 2) God promised Abraham that he and his offspring (singular) would be a blessing to the whole world, not just the Jews.
- 3) We are all heirs of the promise of Abraham through faith, because Christ is that one offspring and heir, and we become heirs through faith in him. *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.* (Galatians 3:29)
- 4) The law served as a "guard" and a "disciplinarian" until Christ came and all people could have faith in him. Later, in Romans, this argument is developed even further, and he states that the purpose of the Law is to convict us of our need for grace.

Now, as we move into chapter 4, Paul uses two primary analogies to deal with the relationship of the law to both Jews and Gentiles.

Children/slaves and adoption

Galatians 4:1-11

Paul has just shared that the law is like a jail guard (*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed – 3:23*) and a disciplinarian (*Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian. – 3:24-25*). These must have been difficult images for the Jewish Galatians to hear. Paul now moves to a different analogy, which, in verses 1-11, has a five-point story line:

The people of Israel have been like a child who has not yet matured enough to think for him or herself, so the law was a necessary “guardian” and “trustee.” This is perhaps a less difficult image for the Jewish readers to stomach than prison guard or disciplinarian. These children are, in Paul's words, “no better than slaves.” While this is difficult for us to hear in an era where children are put at the very center of a family's world, it made perfect sense in Paul's day. Children had no social status or usefulness as children, except for their future value to help care for aging parents and continue the parents' legacy. They were only of value because of their potential. They were to obey the rules, period, until such time as their father deemed them ready. I suppose more than one teenager has cried out against the bonds a parent sets upon them. “Why can't I stay out past eleven? Why do I have to make my bed every day?” Ah, there will come a day when they are free to do whatever they want to do, a time when they have reached a level of maturity in which rule-following is replaced by wisdom and boundaries are self-determined for the good of all. But until that time, rules are rules. The law is the law.

Gentiles were slaves to “elemental spirits” of the world. In verse 8, Paul writes “*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods.*” Remember that Paul's primary

audience is not Jewish Christians, but rather Gentile Christians who have chosen to be circumcised and follow Jewish law. These Gentiles grew up in a pagan world, and the gods and goddesses and rituals were all symbolic of natural processes. Their Gallic ancestors brought their gods with them to this region, and the Romans assigned them Roman names to correspond with their own gods. The pagan Galatians were subject to Jupiter—the Roman god of the sky and lightning, Venus—the goddess of love and sex, Bacchus—the god of both wine and religious ecstasy, and a whole pantheon of gods whose games and drama spilled over into the everyday existence of the normal men and women of the Gentile world. This would have been clear to the Gentiles reading this letter. Paul is saying that these are not really gods at all, and that in their former lives, they were not free, but rather slaves to the power of these deities.

The Law, too, is like these elemental spirits that enslave us. OK, now it is getting dicey for his secondary audience, the Jewish Christian readers. In verse 3, Paul says *“so with us, while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.”* When Paul uses the term “us” or “we,” he is most often speaking of the Jewish community of which he was a part. For a Jew, there was nothing more offensive than idolatry, and the pagan world was full of idols. Is the Law no different than these idols? At this point, Paul is pulling no punches. He groups them in the same category. It is not that he is calling the Law an idol. Rather the Law and these pagan forces are the same because they are both powerless to save us. They are “weak and beggarly” (verse 4:9) All they can do is bind us to jump through hoops and go through the motions over and over and over again, and do nothing to bring us into right relationship with the living God.

At the right time, God intervened and sent Jesus to “adopt” all of us into God’s family. In verses 4-5, we get a beautiful description God’s intention in Jesus.

- *“When the fullness of time had come...”* God sets the time, and things happen in God’s time, not ours. It is the “fullness” of time, in that all of history has been waiting for this event.
- *“God sent his Son...”* The actor here is God, not any of us, and certainly not the elemental spirits. There is nothing we can do – we simply benefit from God’s decision. The power of God to save is in contrast to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits.
- *“born of woman...”* The incarnation, “God made flesh,” God being born as a human being, is made clear. God chose to enter our world to set us free. He lived a human life, suffered human pain, died a human death. He did not live as the Roman gods, who were more concerned with their own affairs than with that of humans. Rather, Jesus fully identifies with humanity.
- *“born under the law...”* Jesus was born a Jew. He sweat Jewish sweat. He bled Jewish blood.
- *“in order to redeem those who were under the law...”* The law was powerless to save; it could only serve to guard us until we could be brought into the family.
- *“that we might receive adoption as children.”* This notion of being “adopted” into God’s covenant family by faith makes perfect sense for the Gentiles. Here, however, Paul appears to be applying the image to Jewish Christians as well. Again, Paul ordinarily uses the term “we” when referring to Jewish Christians, and here he says “we” were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world, and that “we” might receive adoption as children. His mixed metaphors are confusing, but his

point is clear—it is through God’s action in Jesus Christ that both Jews and Gentiles are brought into the family of God.

The Holy Spirit is a validation of our adoption. How do we know we are part of the family? “*And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our^h hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”* (4:6) The Holy Spirit pours into us, and validates within us that relationship we have with God as loving Father, and our right relationship with him. Verse 8 says, “*now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...*” The Holy Spirit is confirmation that we are known and loved by God.

Christians are born of a free woman

Galatians 4:21-31

The second analogy that Paul uses is even more challenging than the first. At the end of chapter 4, Paul lifts up the Biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac. The story would have been so familiar to the Jewish Christian audience: Abraham received a *promise* from God that he would be the father to many nations, that he would receive the land of Israel, and that his name would be a blessing. His wife, Sarah, had been unable to bear children, so Abraham fathered a child by Hagar, his slave concubine, and named the boy Ishmael. In her old age, however, Sarah finally gave birth to a boy, and named him Isaac. Sarah, jealous of the firstborn of Abraham, threw Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, where God ultimately sent angels to care for them.

Paul’s reflection on this story is called “a midrash.” A **midrash** is a commentary on the Torah, in which a rabbi applies the Scripture to a contemporary situation. Why would Paul use such an analogy, especially when his audience was Gentile? Scholars speculate that Paul is turning on its head an argument that had been raised by the Jewish Christians when they sought to convince the Gentiles to live like Jews. These teachers would have traced the promise of God’s favor through Isaac to the Jewish people, and they would have claimed that the story itself meant that Judaism was the inheritor of the promise, that the Christian faith is really just a continuation of Judaism, and that to be included in the covenant, one would have to be circumcised. Paul, however, claims the story for himself, and turns it around the other way. He says the passage is to be understood allegorically, as follows:

Hagar

- is a slave, and is
- mother of the people of Arabia, home of Mt. Sinai, the place Moses received the Law, and
- therefore, represents the Law, and
- therefore, represents the earthly Jerusalem, the capital of the nation of Israel, and
- therefore, represents the Jewish people, who are
- therefore, children of slavery.

Sarah

- is a free woman, and
- therefore, is mother of anyone who receives the promise by faith, and
- therefore, represents the Jerusalem above where God is present, and
- therefore, those who receive the promise by faith are not slaves but free.

Paul goes on to quote Genesis 21:10: “*Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.’*” According to Paul, one can only receive the promise of God through faith, not by Jewish Law, and the story of Isaac and Ishmael, understood through the eyes of faith, testifies to this truth.

A personal appeal to the Galatians

Separating these two analogies in the text – between children/adoption and Sarah/Hagar – is a personal appeal from Paul to the Galatians. He asks “why would you go back to slavery again?” and exclaims “I am afraid my work is in vain.” His argument here follows three steps:

- 1) He calls first on their history together, and reminds them of how much they loved him and cared for him. It appears that Paul’s first journey through Galatia was hampered by an illness, causing him to stop in those Galatian churches. Some scholars believe that ailment to have been blindness, based on verse 15: “*had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.*” This is reinforced in chapter 6, when Paul says “*see what large letters I write with my own hand.*” (6:11) This may be perhaps speculation, but there is no doubt that Paul is reminding them of their love and care for him.
- 2) He tells them that these new teachers are making a big deal of the circumcision, but that their motives are not pure. Their teaching is not really for the good of the Gentiles. Rather, it is so the Jewish Christians can treat Gentiles as second-class citizens and make themselves feel superior.
- 3) He reminds them of how much he loves them, and uses the image of a mother’s love and pain in childbirth, as he watches them struggle.

A warning: no hedging your bets

Paul concludes this section of the letter with one more warning in the beginning of Chapter 5. Gentiles, don’t go back to being slaves, whether to pagan gods or to the Law. You are free of all of that! Paul’s admonition in verse 1 “*Do not submit to a yoke of slavery*” is a reference to a common statement from rabbis that Jews are to submit to “the yoke of the law.” It is this same image that leads Jesus to say “*my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” (Matthew 11:30).

Paul's admonition is urgent and strident. If you become a Jew and choose to follow Jewish laws,

- Christ will be of no benefit to you. (verse 2)
- You will be "cut off" from Christ. (verse 4... Yes, the allusion to the physical nature of circumcision is intended, even more clearly in the Greek, and any graceful dancing around the words is abandoned later in verse 12: "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves.")
- You will have fallen from grace. (verse 4)

The words "fall from grace," have been the subject of much debate over the years. If grace is a free gift, freely given, no strings attached, how can we "fall from grace?" Note that Paul doesn't say that God withdraws grace, that grace is no longer available, that God's love for us or view of us has changed in any way. No, he is simply saying that we are refusing that grace. Like any gift, grace must be received and accepted. If a friend leaves a gift on my doorstep, and I choose to leave it there untouched, it is still a gift, and the giver's intent and love remains. But the gift is of no benefit to me. God's grace works the same way. God never takes away our free will to accept or reject God's grace.

So, what does it hurt to follow these laws? Why shouldn't the Galatians choose to do what they want? If we are free, shouldn't we be free to be circumcised, to follow Jewish laws, to eat and dress differently, to have different calendar observances and different rhythms to life? Paul's point is that to choose these religious rituals is to choose the mark of the Law rather than faith. Unlike the means of grace we considered last week – prayer, worship, study, etc., which are designed to draw us into faith, the religious rituals of the law served to set people apart from others, to mark them for the law itself. Faith, Paul says, is an "either or" proposition. You either choose to live by faith, or you choose to live by the law. You cannot do both.

Perhaps you have read *Tattoos on the Heart*, by Father Gregory Boyle. Boyle is a Jesuit priest, who began a ministry in the late 1980's because of the frequent deaths of young people caught up in gang violence in his parish in Los Angeles. He runs Homeboy Industries with ex-gang members, many of whom are ex-convicts as well. When these men come to him, one of the first things Homeboy does is put them through a tattoo removal program. Why? Because these tattoos are marks, symbols of a former life, a membership in a gang, a mark of an identity. You can't have two identities. Similarly, you are either under the law or under grace. You are either under the yoke of slavery or you are free. You are either a part of the body of Christ – regardless of whether you are male or female, Gentile or Jew – or you are separated from the body of Christ. You can't hedge your bets. It is an either or affair.

Ending slavery... (to anything but Jesus)

Paul's overarching theme throughout Galatians is "don't go back to slavery." What are the things that enslave you and me? Few of us are tempted to worship any graven images or pagan deities. Neither are most of us are driven to hyper-religiosity. How does this passionate letter apply to us? I think there are three temptations that draw us back into slavery.

We may be tempted to go back to slavery by giving ourselves to the elemental spirits of today's world.

The gods of our modern culture manifest themselves differently than those of ancient Rome, but at their

core, they are still the same basic elemental spirits of the world. There is a great pantheon of modern deities:

We may be slaves to *status*. We are driven by what other people think of us, and where we stand in the social pecking order. This begins early in life, and reaches its apex in adolescence. Some of us never grow up.

We may be slaves to *pleasure*. The basic drive for pleasure, whether it be from food or sex or entertainment, will dominate our brains and take hold of us.

We may be slaves to *beauty*. We look at ourselves in the mirror, and what matters most is if we like what we see. We believe that the outside of us is a reflection of the inside of us, and if we can make ourselves look ok, then we will be ok.

We may be slaves to *ambition*. What we want is that corner office, and for that corner office to be nobly earned. We want others to believe we work harder and smarter than anybody else. We want to be thought of as invaluable to our colleagues and to the world. When we retire and are no longer working, we wonder if we have any value at all.

We may be slaves to *comfort*. I want my life to be easy and uncomplicated. Don't mess with my way of life, with the status quo. I am not good at change.

We may be slaves to *order*. Everything must be exactly as it is supposed to be. Each thing must be in its right place. Every task must be completed on time, and in the proper order and proper fashion.

We may be slaves to *ideology*. We make our decisions based on whether an action is conservative or progressive, tolerant or accountable, democratic or authoritarian.

We may be slaves to *tribe*. What matters is whether we are loyal to our chosen tribe. Are we patriotic enough, American enough, Christian enough, black enough, white enough, republican enough, democrat enough?

We may be slaves to *security*. Will I have enough money not to worry about things? Self-sufficiency is the driving force here, to not have to depend on someone else for what I need, both for me and for my family. The great enemy is anxiety, and pursuit of this god is a quest to rid myself of all fear.

We may be slaves to *power*. I want to be the one to decide how things in the world should be. I will continue to seek to control not only my own life, but to have authority and influence over the lives of many other people.

We may be slaves to *greed*. Enough is never enough for me. I will always want more. More money. More stuff. More everything.

This is quite a pantheon of cultural gods. And like the ancient gods of Rome, these gods often play together. Some of these modern gods are the children of other gods. And sometimes these modern gods

even compete with one another. Paul's message to us is an admonition to choose to be a slave, a servant, only of Jesus, and don't go back to slavery to these elemental spirits of the world.

Second, we can be tempted to believe that we get right with God by faith in Christ, plus something else.

When we succumb to this brand of religious slavery, we think that yes, we must trust in Jesus, **plus** we must always act like we trust in Jesus. If we are behaving like good Christians, then we must be trusting Jesus and we are right with God. And if we aren't behaving like we trust Jesus, then we are just not right with God. It manifests itself in a performance based faith rather than a grace based faith. This "faith plus performance" approach can tempt us on either end of the self-righteousness continuum. It can make us claim self-righteousness:

I know I am right with God because I trust Jesus **and** go to church every week.

I know I am right with God because I trust Jesus **and** study the Bible and pray and tithe.

I know I am right with God because I trust Jesus **and** vote like a good Christians should vote. (And there are people who vote a wide variety of ways driven by what they truly believe are Christian values.)

I know I am right with God because I trust Jesus **and** work hard for the right social causes.

Any time we put an "and" along with faith, we make our faith performance based, and find ourselves back in slavery again. Conversely, this performance based faith shows up on the other end of the self-righteousness continuum.

If I really trusted Jesus, I wouldn't have this addiction. God says I can be set free from this addiction, and I am still addicted, so I must be doing something wrong. This must not be complete surrender. I am not doing it right.

If I really trusted Jesus, things would be going better for me. I wouldn't have these financial problems. God promises to bless us if we will have faith, and I am not being blessed, so I must not have real faith. I am just not doing it right.

If I really had faith and trusted in Jesus, I would work at my spiritual life more. I would pray and study Scripture and practice those pesky inside-out habits. But I just can't seem to make those a really important part of my life. I am just not doing it right.

If I really trusted Jesus, I would do more to make a difference in the world. I have seen real Christians. They are always going on mission trips and working in the church and community. They take care of their neighbors. They are real Christians. I am just a faker.

If I really trusted Jesus, I would be tithing, or more! When I look at my checkbook, I am so selfish.

Let me be clear; when we have faith, God does indeed work in our lives to bring about transformation. The Holy Spirit works to sanctify us, and we will talk more about it in the next lessons. But that is different than saying it is a criterion for being right with God. Here is an analogy: I love my wife, and my

wife loves me. And because I love my wife, I tell her I love her. I do things around the house that she asks me to do. I call her when I am going to be late. There are so many things I do because I love my wife. However, if I did not do them, it would not mean that I don't love my wife. What's more, I know that I am free to **not** do these things, and still be deeply in love with her. I do them because I choose to, not because I am obligated. In fact, there are many times I fall very short in demonstrating that love, but I still love her with all my heart. What is more, it would be very possible for me to do all those things just because I feel obligated, and actually **not** really love her, but simply to be putting on the trappings of a loving marriage.

Sometimes, we turn faith itself into a performance. Paul's message: Real grace means it is faith plus nothing!

Finally, we can be tempted to return to the slavery of "just good living." Sometimes, I hear people say that because of God's grace, what you believe doesn't matter at all. If you are a good person, you will be right with God. There are three key problems with this approach. First, how good does one have to be? We discussed this more fully in our last lesson, but consider that the Scriptural standard is to be just as good as Jesus. None of us can reach that level by good living. Second, this approach encourages us to believe that we don't need God's grace at all. It is this sense of self-sufficiency that stands most fully in the way of us understanding and receiving God's grace through faith. And third, to believe that people who are "mostly good" are right with God eliminates the very people Jesus seemed most worried about. Tim Keller points it out in his commentary of Galatians:

If all good people can know God, then Jesus' death was not necessary; all it takes is virtue. The trouble is, this means bad people have no hope, contradicting the gospel, which invites "both good and bad" to God's feast (Matthew 22:10). If you say people are saved by being good, then only "the good" can come in to God's feast. The gospel offer becomes exclusive, not inclusive.¹

Yes, the temptation to return to slavery is strong. The elemental spirits of the universe, the god of faith plus performance, the cultural god of being a good person... all of these beckon us to take on their yoke. Instead, we are to be slaves only to Christ, to take on his yoke, received by faith, and live as people free to serve him alone.

Postscript

As I write this lesson on slavery, I am acutely aware that at the same time many of us struggle with our return to spiritual slavery, we live in a world where there is the problem of **real modern day slavery**. While St. Paul is not addressing this particular issue, we would be remiss without some mention of a problem that is tragically pervasive in much of the world. I recently heard Gary Haugen, the Executive Director of the International Justice Mission speak. There are 45 million people held in slavery

¹ Keller, Timothy. Galatians For You (God's Word For You) (p. 8). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

throughout the world. That is more people enslaved than ever before, in all of history. Sometimes it is forced labor. Although slavery has been outlawed in nearly every country, millions of men, women and children are working as slaves in brick kilns, rice mills, garment factories, fishing operations and many other industries. Sometimes it is sex trafficking, with 2 million children being taken or sold in the sex trafficking industry every year. The solution requires political and social pressure to begin enforcement of laws already in existence, as well as services to support victims when they are liberated from their slave masters. As we consider our own spiritual slavery, perhaps we might find God beckoning us to be a part of his work in setting these people free from the violence and oppression that surrounds them each and every day. For more information, go to www.ijm.org.

Sunday School Words

Spend enough time in church or with Christians and you will run across some words that we don't use frequently in our normal day-to-day conversation. However, these concepts are important for understanding Paul's letter and the Christian faith. Each week, we will examine a few of these "Sunday school words" so that they may shed light on the context of the lesson.

Redeem

Greek *exagorazo*, literally "buy away from." Used in the marketplace to describe a good deal. Think about when you find toilet paper at Costco at a cheap cost, and so you buy it all up. In the context of debt slavery, you could buy up a person's debt and that person would now be your property to set free or put to work. Paul uses the word as a way of explaining what Christ has done. Christ is the payment for God buying us out from the power of the law.

Curse

Greek *katara*, literally "curse (noun), cursed person, doomed person." The connotation is bondage/captivity to an unseen force. Paul uses similar logic in Romans when he says we were under the "dominion" of sin. In that case, sin is a force that compels people to do what they do not want to do. Christ sets us free from that domination.

In Galatians 3, Paul is saying that obedience to the law is a symptom of greater curse. As Christians, we know that we cannot do any work that will make right our relationship with God. But the law says we have to do these works, and they are a constant reminder that we are not right with God, and we have to do these works to get right with God, and they remind us once again to get right with God... The curse is the cycle itself. It's being trapped in a cycle of working for justification, being reminded we will never make it, then trying again and again and still falling short. Faith in Jesus sets us free from that curse.

Baptism into the body of Christ

Paul uses imagery of clothing to describe baptism. Galatians 3:27, literally: "as many as to Christ were baptized, Christ you have put on." Immediately Paul goes on to say, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." All who are baptized into Christ have put on his body like clothing. It is the

same garment, the same article of clothing, for all the baptized. All our differences are hidden inside that same piece of clothing.

Ephesians says something similar in Ephesians 2: “he has abolished the law... so that he might create in himself one new humanity.” The preposition in is crucial. We all exist in this one body, like we all exist inside the same pair of jeans. We are in one new humanity named Jesus.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why would the Jewish Christians in Galatia take particularly great offense to Paul calling them "no better than slaves"?
2. Summarize Paul's argument in Galatians 4:1-7 where he calls the heirs of Abraham's covenant "slaves." What is Paul's point?
3. Why would Paul call the law a "god" like the pagan gods?
4. Summarize the allegory of Sarah and Hagar. (Hint: pay attention to 4:28.)
5. The law was supposed to establish community standards for ethical living and prevent sin. Does this mean Christians get to continue in sin since we have been set free from the law? What keeps us from living any way we'd like?
6. The theme for this week's lesson is Freedom from Religion. According to Paul, how does religion keep us from being totally free people?
7. When have you been trapped in religion? When has Jesus set you free from religion?



Week 5: Freedom from Slavery Daily Readings

Week 5: Day 1 - Romans 9:30-10:4

Commentary: This week, we're talking about freedom from religion. Though it may seem strange to talk about freedom from religion within the context of, well, religion, the intention here is not to convince you not to be religious, but rather to lead you into a deeper relationship with God by remembering the goal of religion itself. For it is the goal, the purpose of religion, and not religion itself, that gives faith its meaning. It is not the rules and procedures of religion that matter; it's the end-game of religion that matters.

And what is that end-game? It's Jesus, plain and simple. Paul believed that Jesus is and always has been what religion points toward. The Jewish law, like all religion, is a means to an end, and Jesus is the end. The law is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as it is practiced with the intention of growing closer to Jesus. But Paul knew that most of his Jewish family did not believe that way. They believed the law was both the means and the end to religion, and in that case that law became a stumbling block. Again, Paul did not see the law as inherently bad; rather, the law becomes a tripping hazard to salvation when the law is practiced for the sake of the law, rather than for the sake of reaching Jesus.

It is Jesus, and not the law, that saves us. We practice our religion so that we can fall more in love with Jesus. It is the so that that is the deal-breaker and life-saver for Paul, and for us.

Reflection Question: When have you missed the point of religion?

Week 5: Day 2 - Hebrews 10:1-4

Commentary: Two points may be made here by way of example. First, you cannot solve the problem of sin with the same stuff that created it. There's a famous quote from Albert Einstein: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." The same logic applies to sin. Sin is a

work of human hands and hearts. The sacrifice system required by the Jewish law is also a work of human hands and hearts. The stuff that causes sin cannot be the stuff that eradicates sin. We need something different, something of the “good things to come” and not of the present “shadow.”

Second, you cannot cure the chronic condition of sin with the acute treatment of animal sacrifice. That’s like an oncologist treating a cancer patient with cough syrup. The sacrifice system of the ancient Jewish Temple was good for temporarily healing the people of their sins on a year-to-year basis. It was a bandage for a season, not a cure for life. But the sacrifice of Jesus is no bandage: it offers complete healing of the disease, because Jesus was no animal and not just a man. Jesus was God in the flesh, and his sacrifice can do what no other sacrifice could. His is the lifetime treatment for your chronic condition of sin.

Reflection Question: Who in your life does Jesus to heal of chronic sin? Maybe it’s you. Use this space to write the names you think of, and what God is doing in their lives.

Week 5: Day 3 - Genesis 15:1-6

Commentary: This passage is crucial to the theology of the New Testament, and particularly for Paul. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without this Genesis story, Paul may never have found the right language to articulate his central claim that salvation comes through faith and not works.

Paul cites Genesis 6 word-for-word in Romans 4:3. There, Paul says that salvation through faith is a more ancient form of relating to God than salvation through works, since Abram lived before the law was given. In fact, it is Abram’s relationship with God that serves as Paul’s prototype for what everyone’s relationship with God should look like. Abram simply had faith that God would provide him with an heir. There was no “work”, no sacrifice or religious procedure - not even circumcision, the trademark religious work of the Jewish people - to serve as an intermediary between Abram and God. It is Abram’s way of relating to God, and not the way of the law, which came centuries later, that should serve as the model for the early Christians, Jew and non-Jew, and for us.

Reflection Question: When in your life have you simply stepped out on faith? How did that strengthen your relationship with God?

Week 5: Day 4 - Ephesians 2:11-16

Commentary: This week we have been talking about freedom from religion. This passage from Ephesians is a reminder of how much religion is a force of division in the world. Religion is more of a cause of violence than a solution to it; religion is more of a catalyst for hate than a remedy for it; religion is more of a reason for prejudice than the abolition of it.

But where religion fails, Jesus succeeds. Jesus has done what religion could not: Jesus created one new humanity through his sacrifice on the cross. All people are caught up in his body, which was killed, yes,

but was then resurrected, giving birth to a new age of humans relating to one another. We no longer relate by way of religion, or any class or label that we put on ourselves. We relate to one another in Jesus: the preposition is essential. We exist in his resurrected body, and in that body is peace, mercy, and forgiveness, Religion cannot unify the way the resurrected body of Jesus can. We have been freed from religion and freed for a collective life in Jesus.

Reflection Question: Tell a short story of when you have experienced the new humanity in Jesus.

Week 5: Day 5 - Hosea 6:1-6

Commentary: Hosea is one of the earlier prophetic writers in the Old Testament, and prophesied during the decline and overthrow of the northern kingdom of Israel in the late eighth century BC. Hosea likened Israel's relationship with God to marriage. His main argument is that Israel has been unfaithful: the people have cheated on God with the false gods of other nations. Yet still God remains faithful to the marriage covenant. God will woo Israel back into the covenant. God's love is never in question.

Where have the people failed? They cheapened their relationship with God thinking it was about sacrifices when all along it was about steadfast love. The sacrifices are not inherently negative, but without performing them in the context of love, they become a "stumbling block" (to use Paul's language). The sacrifice is a means of loving this God who has a forever love for us; the sacrifice should not be used, however, as a means of gaining anything, whether that's self-approval, political advantage, social capital, or any other cunning way we have of saving ourselves. It is God who saves, not any work of our hands or hearts. Once we get that, we'll understand that God is not that into religion but eternally into us.

Reflection Question: When have you tried to save yourself? How did that work for you?