

Galatians 4:1-11; 5:1-6
Living Out Grace – Living as Sons
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Last week we were looking at one of the most famous stories ever told – the parable of the prodigal son or, as we saw, the parable of the prodigal sons.

It's a masterful tale – brief but powerful – telling the story of a Father and his two children, both of whom love his possessions more than they love him and speaking of the Father's great grace in reaching out both to the son who ran away to waste his money in the big city and to the son who stayed at home but believed himself to be an unpaid servant.

We saw that the parable speaks not just about one family but about the whole human race. Each of us, without exception, has rejected the wonderful possibilities of a relationship with the God who loves us and chosen instead either to stick two fingers up at him and head off to the bright lights of doing what we please... or we have chosen to stay at home, bound by rules we think will impress God but and seeking some performance related brownie points through our religious or moral devotion. Of course most of us have had phases of each of these approaches – often with our times of being good used to try and drown out the nagging accusations of our conscience for all the time we've spent being bad.

You might be forgiven for wondering though why, having looked at that wonderful story last week, this week we're looking at some bits from Paul's letter to the Galatians that seem to say more or less the same thing but without the vivid fascination of the parable? Isn't it enough to hear the story of God's love for us and be moved to respond by accepting his grace? Why do we need to fill in the details and get into doctrine? Aren't we just killing off the beauty of the image of how much God loves us by overanalysing it?

Well it's certainly possible to overanalyse things. And we would be fools if we allowed the wonderful emotional impact of the parable of the prodigal sons to diminish in our lives so that we are not overwhelmed by the extent and lavishness of God's grace to us.

But I also want to challenge the assumption, so common in our culture, that we will spoil something by thinking about it. That somehow the kind of life that it is best to live is one in which things just happen to us – a series of experiences – and that we

need to engage with them purely at an emotional level rather than a reflective or intellectual one.

The parable of the prodigals, like all Jesus' stories, is striking and powerful. And it's designed to move us to response. But it's also there to be thought about and reflected upon. Responding to what Jesus says merely according to how it makes us feel at the time is not, as some might suppose, a mark of great authenticity in our spirituality. Instead it is a sign that we are engaging with only part of our being – the feeling part – in our relationship with Christ, when we ought to be engaging also, not instead, but also, with our minds as we think about what the parable of the prodigals says to us.

That, fundamentally, is why, throughout history, God has expected his word to be preached – that is explained and commented upon by people with a call to respond. Preaching exists to make both preacher and listeners reflect on what God says so that we can both understand it better and respond to it with hearts, minds and wills.

So, this morning, we're going to think about the reflections of the apostle Paul, on this topic of God's grace. I don't know if Paul had the parable of the prodigals in view as he wrote these sections of Galatians; he would certainly have known the story and I can't help but think it must at least have flashed across his mind as he composed this letter.

Because the two sorts of people that Paul talks about here are exactly like the two sons in that parable. But Paul gives us a new angle on what it's like to live these kind of lives – the life of supposed freedom and the life of religious rules.

In the parable we were made to think mostly about how awful it was that the sons should treat their loving father in this way and how astonishing his grace is in allowing either of them a way back into the family. But in these verses we're going to focus more on the misery that living in these ways brings to us.

Because for Paul one of the key things about the life of "freedom" and the life of rules is that they are both terrible kinds of slavery. And Paul wants us to know how we can, instead, be truly free.

Let's start by thinking about what I guess we could call the irreligious person, though I wouldn't want

you to think this necessarily means they are an atheist – plenty of those who believe in God or gods, live in this way...

1 Slaves to freedom

Not knowing God, Paul says, 4:8, is slavery, slavery to those who by nature are not gods. Slavery, to weak and miserable principles.

But what does that really mean? After all as you look round Liverpool city centre on a Saturday afternoon or a Friday night there appear to be plenty of people who are exercising great, almost unrestrained freedom. We know that for some of them, for some of us!, some of the time it ends in disaster and misery. But surely most of the time, for most people it all goes well doesn't it? The money might have run out for the prodigal son in Jesus' story, and some lose everything today. But most people just keep on partying don't they? How can they be **slaves** when they're obviously having such a good time?

Well there's a few things I'd want to say about that...

The first one is that I'm not really convinced that actually most of these people are really all that happy. A survey done recently in the United States seems to bear this out. Over the whole of the last 35 years conservative and religious people have been found to be well over twice as likely to say that they are "very happy" compared to secular liberal people. And I suspect that, if your experience is anything like mine, individuals you know tell the same story. Catch them after the hangover wears off or at some other particularly honest moment and many of our city's most voracious party animals will confess to intense feelings of pointlessness, loneliness, fear and worry – in fact often their behaviour is an attempt to drown out these feelings which otherwise threaten to be overwhelming. For a society that values pleasure and happiness above all else it has to be said that we are, by and large, pretty miserable!

The second thing I'd want to say is that, in the end, I'm not sure that being a slave and being unhappy are quite the same thing. So just because we might find contentment in our slavery doesn't mean it isn't real – just as the fact that some people quite like being in prison and find great security there doesn't mean they're not in prison. You see the trouble with "freedom" – that great idol of our society – it that it's an impersonal principle. The trouble with freedom is that it doesn't care about us. So it never really answers the question of how we should live. I should be free to follow my desires, our culture tells me. OK. I desire to eat loads of chips and Chinese take away.

And I'm free to do that. But I also know that will do me harm. So I'm free not to do it – if I desire not to. But I desire both. How does freedom help me choose between two opposite things that I want both of – functional arteries and deep fried chilli beef? How does freedom help me choose between sexual thrills and sexual faithfulness? How does it help me choose between following my desire to look after the planet and following my desire to fly round the world?

You see freedom as an idea doesn't help me at all really does it? All it does is make me a slave to whichever one of my feelings happens to come out on top at any given moment. That's why we're all so messed up isn't it – alternating between desiring Cadburys and desiring to be a size 10. Between desiring to save for a house and desiring to blow it all on a car. Between desiring to stay faithful to our girlfriend and desiring to sleep with a stranger.

And because the idea of freedom gives you no way to choose between the merits of any of those courses of actions all you are left with is slavery – following the opinions of whichever group of people you're in or just whatever your heart tells you the right thing to do right now is.

But the third and final thing to say is that the reason people are slaves when they think they are free is because behind the freedom of the world stands something much more sinister.

That's so often the case in life isn't it. Here's what actress Helen Mirren had to say recently about her youthful cocaine habit:

I loved coke. I never did a lot, just a little bit at parties. But what ended it for me was when they caught Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie, the Butcher of Lyon, in the early 80s. He was hiding in South America and living off the proceeds of being a cocaine baron. And I read that in the paper, and all the cards fell into place, and I saw how my little sniff of cocaine at a party had an absolute direct route to this ... horrible man in South America.

Well just as organised criminal gangs stand behind so many of the freedoms – gambling, prostitution and illegal drugs – that people on our city enjoy so something sinister stands behind all our supposed freedom. Paul actually refers to it subtly in the passage. 4:9 "weak and miserable principles". The principles he is referring to are, in the final analysis, not completely impersonal. Behind our world's ideas of freedom stand spiritual forces who have no positive interest in us at all. Satan and his minions are real. Behind our addiction to what we think is

pleasing ourselves, we are actually delivering ourselves into bondage at his hands and into his power. Sure sometimes it feels good. But the reality is that for most people freedom doesn't bring that much happiness, doesn't give us any way of deciding what actually matters and delivers us into the hands of evil forces who hate not just God but us as well.

We can be slaves to freedom, but we can also be slaves to rules.

2 Slaves to rules

Now I guess it won't be much of a surprise to most people here this morning that Paul was no great fan of the paganism of the 1st Roman empire. With its celebration of perverse sexual practices, its emphasis on power over wisdom, its tendency to increase corruption and cronyism in political life and, supremely, its worship of many gods, we can imagine that Paul, the strictly raised Jewish boy, would have found it offensive and disgusting. And we've seen that before they became Christians, before they knew the one true God, the Galatians, as happy and free as they might have thought they were, were in reality, nothing more than slaves. But what is even more shocking than that is what Paul says next.

Because the Galatians have escaped that life. They have turned in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ and put their trust in him. They know God – or rather, v9, are known by God. Paul wants to stress that this happened not because the Galatians were clever and worked it out but because God was gracious and revealed himself to them. They are known by God. Now they have a living relationship with the one true God, the God of the Bible, the God who is there. And they are turning back to slavery. Not this time to the slavery of pagan religion. But to a new slavery. To the slavery of the Jewish Old Testament law.

That is an outrageous thing for Paul to say. This law was given by God himself. And now Paul is saying that to try and seek salvation in the law, to use the law of God as a moral job description to show how much we deserve his blessing is really to be just as much enslaved as the pleasure seeking pagan. Look at how he puts it in 5:2 "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all."

Thinking that they can the life of blessing and happiness they want through keeping religious rules is just the same as serving false gods or making yourself god. Keeping religious rules is just another form of slavery.

Why? Well Paul makes it clear: You see if you start thinking that you please God by obeying religious rules, v3, it's not sufficient to just get circumcised (which was a key religious rule for OT Jews). If you think you get right with God by rule keeping then you can't just get circumcised and ignore the 612 other rules that the Jewish scholars of Paul's day had found in the Old Testament law. If you want to be made right by rule keeping – you've got to keep all the rules. All of them. All of the time. And to do that, v4, is to fall away from Christ. It is to deny grace. If you want to establish your own goodness by keeping religious rules then that's what you've got to do. All the time.

And if you break the rules – well, quite frankly, you're stuffed. Because rules can't forgive you. If keeping the rules is at the centre of your life then as soon as you break them the centre of your life is gone isn't it? That's why rule keeping is such a slavery.

And it's why people whose life is based on rule keeping are so pedantic and difficult. Because they constantly have to manipulate what the rules are in order to show that they've kept them. In Jesus' own day "love your neighbour as yourself" became something like "love your neighbour as long as he's just like you and not foreign or a different race or morally dubious and you like him". And in our culture Jesus' golden rule of "do to others as you would be done to" becomes "don't do to anyone else what you wouldn't want done to you." – or in common parlance, you can do what you like as long as you don't hurt anyone. In other places it becomes it doesn't matter what you do as long as you've been baptised and turn up to confession every now and again. Or even you can live how you like as long as you die a martyr's death in jihad.

Do you see they're all basically the same? They are trying to establish our goodness through religious rules – and constantly dumbing down the rules so that there's a chance we can keep them.

That's slavery. Imagine taking that sort of life really seriously. You'd be constantly worrying about whether you'd done enough. Whether this infringement or that had crossed the line. Because rules can't forgive you.

A kind of Christianized religiosity where we maintain favour with God by our good works is just as much slavery as straightforward paganism. Paul gives us an example to prove it, 4:10: "*You are observing special days and months and seasons and years.*"

Both the pagan and the Jewish calendar had all sorts of festivals related to the passing of time – celebrations of Sabbath, new year, lunar months, fallow years, Jubilee and so on. For the Jews their calendar of special events was something that marked them out as different to the pagan nations around them. But now Paul is saying that observing these special times no longer marks the Jews out as different – it just shows that they are the same as the pagans.

There is no fundamental difference between the person who thinks that God is impressed with me if I don't go to Tesco on Sunday and the person who thinks that they earn divine favour by fasting during Ramadan.

A Christianized religiosity where we seek to maintain favour with God by our good works takes you just as far from God as straightforward paganism.

We can be slaves to rules. But there is another way. What we need to be is...

3 Spirit filled sons

It's easy to think that what happens when people put their trust in Jesus Christ as their king is simply that God no longer counts our sin against us. That he removes it and thinks of us as innocent instead of guilty.

Well that certainly does happen – and it's a wonderful truth. But if that was the whole story the fundamental problem of our lives – the fact that we find it impossible to live in a god-centred rather than a self-centred way – wouldn't be addressed at all would it? Christians would just be people who were fundamentally exactly the same on the inside but with the threat of God's judgment removed.

Fortunately, however, God in Christ does so much more than that. He sent Jesus, 4:5, to redeem, to buy people back, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

God hasn't just cancelled our debts – he has adopted us into his family. He has given us the same family status as Jesus had. He has made us sons (even the girls! – not sexist – to do with inheritance v7!)

I wonder if you went out and asked a bunch of people on the street of Liverpool, either people who live for freedom or who live by rules, what it is that prevents them from living differently what they would say. Or if I ask myself that question what do I say? If I'm being really honest I think I'd say that the reason I try and ignore God or earn his favour with

my rule keeping is just bound up with me. It's just the kind of person that I am. And the trouble is that neither self-indulgence or religious rules can do anything about that can they?

But Paul says that God do something about it – and that he has done something about it. Because when we trust Jesus we become a son. And God, 4:6, sends the spirit of sonship into our hearts so that we are no longer a slave but a son.

God does more than wipe the slate clean. He does more than welcome me. He makes me into a person with a whole new identity – one of his sons.

What does that mean for self-indulgent slavery to "freedom"? Well it means it's got to stop – because it's not the person I am any more. And, wonderfully, it means it CAN stop because now I am a son.

What does that mean for religious rule-keeping to earn God's favour? Well it means it's got to stop – because it's not the person I am any more. And, wonderfully, it means it CAN stop because I am now a son.

Paul describes this life in chapters 5 and 6 as being led by the Spirit. To hear some Christians talk you'd think being led by the Spirit meant God sent you mental text messages to tell you who to go out with or what topic they ought to preach on.

But that's not Paul means at all. Being led by the Spirit is living the life of a son. Being led by the Spirit is having a totally new appreciation of who you are – an adopted son of the God who rules the universe and will give you the whole lot, together with your brothers and sisters, as an inheritance.

Being led by the Spirit means waking up each morning and thinking "who am I?" "I am a child of God". And it means shaping your life around that identity.

How do you live the Christian life? Well it's certainly not easy. But it is, essentially, simple. All you have to do, all I have to do, is remember who we are.

And, if you're here this morning and you're not yet a son it's easy to be one. All you have to do is accept the offer of adoption that God offers, freely, through Jesus to anyone who wants to turn aside from slavery to self-indulgence or slavery to rules and join his family for true freedom.

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