

RETURN TO FREEDOM: ***faith worth fighting for***

a study of the six chapters of **GALATIANS**

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Galatians is one of the most important documents for understanding salvation. Luther's commentary on this letter is considered one of the all-time classics of Christian writing. Galatians is by turns personal, deep, lively, shocking, confusing, and inspiring. It was written in the midst of real conflict, out of deep concern that some particular congregations were on the verge of going astray. After nearly 2000 years, Paul's letter to the Galatians still projects the passionate concern that everyone would come to understand what an amazingly unique and essential gift God has given us in and through Christ.

Though meant for group study, these short sessions can also be used for personal illumination, reflection, and prayer upon the text. Please spend time reading and following it before next Sunday.

INTRODUCTION

Reading someone else's mail is always a little awkward, especially if you've never met the writer and aren't sure exactly what he or she is talking about. In the case of Paul, who wrote the earliest Christian writings that we still have, it's especially difficult. This thing called Christianity was still taking shape at the time, and who knew whether or not it would survive? No one was taking notes and writing down this history as it happened. The fact that we have real letters recovered from the headwaters of Christian faith is astounding in itself – the fact that a few of them have become part of the world's most-read book is surely some kind of miracle.

Paul did not expect Galatians, or any of his letters for that matter, to be read 2000 years in the future. He didn't think there would even BE 2000 years of future. He was ready for the end of the world to come tomorrow (*his* tomorrow). Any day now, he thought, Christ would return and take the faithful to be with him. Paul's letters were made for the moment. They were direct messages to specific readers. We are looking over their shoulders, in a sense, when we read them -- witnessing Paul pour out his passion, sweating and swearing, bragging and blustering, wincing and whining all over these "Holy" Scriptures. So what this letter means to us today should be kept in the perspective of Paul's original situation and circumstances, and our minds should seek to understand those of his original readers.

Keeping the perspective of the historical circumstance does not necessarily mean that we are confined to agree with Paul's outlook, take on his recommendations or accept his conclusions. We may argue with this apostle and decide he got a few things wrong. Plenty of scholars today are making good money doing just that. But the fact that Galatians is in the Bible tells us that it's way more than a historical curiosity in the eyes of the Christian Church.

In this study we will try to uncover the situation and meaning behind the text of Galatians, but not as if we're archeologists studying the past. True, we'll find new information about Paul and his times that are only recorded in this letter. But as Christians we also know we can draw power and wisdom for our own lives from the Word of God, and Galatians has an important message for us about our freedom in Christ.

What makes this unlikely letter Word of God? Not just that it's printed in our Bibles. Galatians gives us new and unique views of who Jesus is and what he accomplished on the cross. It lays out some surprising consequences of the life of Christ for the lives of his followers, the Church. It points us in the direction of what is most essential to anyone who would live for God. All this is done with a wild, unbridled style that emphasizes how high the stakes are in getting this grace thing right. Let's jump in and open this letter, and see where it takes us.

STUDY 1: PAUL, AN APOSTLE

INTRODUCTION (read together)

Galatia is a region in Asia Minor near the modern day Turkish city of Ankara. Paul's letter was not addressed to just one congregation in a specific town or village, but to several churches in that region, congregations that had sprung up not long after Paul visited them many years previously. At that time, he preached and taught there and brought them the "good news," the gospel of Jesus. At some point he also asked them to contribute to the special offering being collected for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1, Gal. 2:10). Somewhere between the year 52-56 AD, Paul wrote this letter, probably from Ephesus or Corinth, after somehow hearing that these churches in Galatia were now beginning to follow false teachers. These people disagreed with Paul about the implications of the gospel as Paul understood it, and were spreading a dangerous "different gospel" (1:6).

Paul would end up dealing with opposition from other missionaries throughout his career. This letter, like 2 Corinthians, shows his fury and disappointment over those who were undoing his preaching and teaching of the freedom of believing in Christ. These others believed Christians should obey aspects of the Jewish law such as circumcision (5:2-12) and observance of special feasts (4:10). For Paul, though, this was more than an issue of dos and don'ts. It comes down to where you put your trust and your heart. In Galatians, Paul most powerfully sets the law and faith at odds with each other, and makes it clear that one leads to bondage and the other brings freedom. The point of view Paul develops in battling for the freedom of faith will later be most clearly and completely set forth in his masterpiece, the letter to the Romans.

READ GALATIANS 1: 1-12

WHO IS THIS PAUL GUY?

Consider and Share: If you are reading a book, what kinds of things are helpful to know about the author? Why is it helpful to know those things? What do you know about Paul? What can you learn about him from these first 12 verses?

Paul begins by calling himself an apostle. It literally means "missionary," one sent out on a mission. The word was most often applied to the closest followers of Jesus. It was used in particular to refer to "the 12 apostles" mentioned in the Gospels who knew Jesus personally. The word applies to those twelve in Acts 1:15-26, where Peter and the others cast lots to choose someone to take the place of Judas after his suicide. To make the eleven twelve again, Matthias is chosen.

Paul probably ruffled a few feathers by referring to himself as an apostle. He did not know Jesus personally. He actually was once an enemy of the early Christians, a persecutor named "Saul" who tried to destroy the Church. He came to faith in Christ through a vision of Jesus as he was traveling to Damascus in order to disrupt the Christians there. The "revelation" he then has at his conversion gives him a new name and a whole new view of God's intentions for the world. He suddenly sees that Jesus is God's Son who is reaching out in love to all people, not just the Jews. Through this experience, Paul was convinced that Jesus had made him an apostle.

Consider and Share: How do we know what to believe about the Bible? How do we know who to believe when two people tell different stories? What makes someone a reliable teacher? Why might some of Paul's contemporaries have had trouble with his claim to be an apostle? How might that affect the way his teaching was received? What would you think if someone told you God had given them a special assignment?

READ GALATIANS 1:13-24

Galatians gives us more personal information about Paul's life than any other letter. **Look up the following passages. Fill out the chart and see what you can learn about Paul's past in this and other New Testament writings:**

<u>APPROXIMATE YEAR</u>	<u>SCRIPTURE</u>	<u>WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT PAUL...</u>
	Acts 21:39	Where is he from?: _____
	Acts 18:3	What was his trade?: _____
	Acts 16:37	What was his citizenship?: _____
	Philippians 3:5	What Jewish group did he belong to?: _____
30 (Jesus' crucifixion)	Galatians 1:13	Persecuted Christians (Acts 7:58; 8:3; Philippians 3:16)
	Acts 9:1-19	Conversion story
35-37 early ministry	Gal. 1:15-18	Where was he these years?: _____ _____ _____
37-38	Gal. 1:18	Then he goes to: _____
38-48	Gal. 1:21	Where was he these years?: _____ _____

READ Paul's account of the story of the early church in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11. "Cephas" is Peter, the most famous apostle. James, the brother of Jesus, was the head of the Church at Jerusalem. These Christians there were all former Jews, and kept most of the Jewish laws and traditions.

Consider and Share: Where does Paul place himself in relation to the other "pillars" of the early church? Why was his first trip to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18) important?

Paul understood himself as a missionary to Gentiles (see Romans 11;13). That someone would go tell the Gospel of Jesus to those outside of Jewish faith and culture was a new idea, one that somehow grew out of his encounter with Jesus. In that encounter, God gave him a new name (from Saul to Paul), a new position (apostle), new mission (to the Gentiles) and new message (a new understanding of the story of Jesus - - what Paul calls his “gospel”).

When he speaks of the gospel he is talking about the story of the good news of what Jesus has done. The problem he speaks to in Galatians is – people are telling that story differently. At least, they are drawing different implications from it. Paul’s understanding of that story, “his” gospel, was a divine gift he received directly from Jesus. This is why he says it is not of human origin (vs. 11). It is not just a teaching. Like his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, it was a revelation from God.

A DIFFERENT GOSPEL?

In Galatians 1:4, Paul has already told us the three things that are at the heart of his version of that story:

1. Jesus gave himself for our sins,
2. He did it to set us free from this evil age, and
3. this was done, not in opposition to God, but according to God’s will.

Each of these three points raises further questions about Paul’s teaching.

1. If our sins are only dealt with by Jesus, what was going on before Jesus came?
2. What part of this evil age are we set free from?
3. If the same God whom the Jews knew and worshiped, (the same God who made Adam and Eve, spoke to Abraham, sent Moses to set his people free, etc.) has now sent Jesus, then what is the relationship between this new gospel and the old law (the commandments, traditions, and regulations of the Old Testament)?

Hopefully we’ll find that Paul’s gospel has some good answers to those questions. But now...word has reached Paul that someone has been teaching the Galatians a different version of the gospel story than the one he brought them. So he writes them this letter.

Consider and Share: What does Paul say about this other teaching in Galatians chapter 1? How does he feel about it? Why does he call it a “different gospel” (vs.6) and not “another gospel” (vs. 7)?

Galatians goes back to a time when the early Church was trying to figure out what a Christian really is, and what “true Christians” should be doing to maintain their identity. Different groups had different ideas. Today more than ever, differing doctrine, teachings, and understandings of Scripture are common within Christianity. There is not just a wide variety of opinions between our modern denominations, but sometimes there is a wide variety *within* a single denomination. A particular understanding of salvation – “are you saved?” or “have you been born again?” – is used by some groups as a litmus test for whether you are part of the “in crowd, if you are a “true Christian” or not.

Consider some of these “different gospels” that we can identify in today’s world.

1. The Prosperity Gospel: also called the “health and wealth gospel,” this is a religious belief among some Christians that financial blessing is the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations (especially to Christian ministries) will increase one's material wealth.
2. “Cheap Grace”: German Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this in his famous book, The Cost of Discipleship. He wrote, “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer says, is to hear the gospel preached as follows: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness."
3. Nationalism: Our country is a “city on a hill” and different from all others. Our citizens are God’s chosen people and our country’s divine mission is to promote and defend our culture’s values and ideals. God’s will is to make our country strong, and what is best for our country is best for the world. If our country attacks, threatens, or oppresses other countries, that’s because they deserved it. We should pray for our country to be the strongest, richest, and most influential in the world. Note: Pope Leo XIII condemned an American version of nationalism as a heresy (false religious teaching)... in 1898!
4. “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”: A sociologist named Christian Smith considers this a common belief system among the current youth of America. It consists of belief that a god exists who created and ordered the world, and now watches over human life on earth from a distance. As many religions teach, this god wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other. This god does not need to be involved in your life, unless you have a problem. Life is all about being happy and feeling good about yourself. Good people will go to heaven when they die.

Consider and Share: What problems do you see with each of these “different gospels”? Can you think of other “different gospels” prevalent in today’s world? What are some essential ingredients to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ? What makes someone a “true Christian?” How do you know?

CLOSING: Pray for those in your group and close by praying the following together –

Lord Jesus, you gave yourself for our sins and rescue us from the sinful influences of the age. Help us know and follow your true gospel rather than the false gods of comfort and pleasure; help us live for you instead of riches and possessions; give us faith that trusts in your grace, so that we may find the freedom to be your people, to love deeply, and to live in hope. Amen

STUDY 2: SMACKDOWN IN ANTIOCH

INTRODUCTION (read together)

Our three branches of government in the United States - legislative, executive, and judicial, were established in order to make, enact, and interpret the laws of the land. For early Christians as for the Jews, God was the chief legislator. His will had been shown through the Law (the first five books) of the Old Testament. This “Law” (Torah) was more than rules and regulations – it was bound up with the story of God’s relationship with creation, humanity, and particularly the Jewish people. God the legislator made the laws, then revealed them through a special person like Noah, Abraham, or Moses who became appointed executors, along with the whole people of Israel.

The judicial function of interpreting those laws could happen through the leader, or those whom the leader appoints. Priests, with the High Priest at their head, have authority to decide religious matters, and to declare people ritually “clean” (Luke 5:14, 17:14). For civil disputes, Moses would delegate judges (Exodus 18) to help him resolve all the cases that were coming to him. Eventually, ultimate Jewish judicial power would come to reside in the High Priest and the council of the Sanhedrin. The New Testament shows considerable conflict between these agents of Jewish legal power, and the new things God is doing through Christ. The Sanhedrin actively seek to kill Jesus (Mark 14:55; John 11) and Stephen (Acts 6). The High Priest (Matthew 26:57-67; John 18:19-24) participates directly in the trial and death of Jesus. His resurrection, however, shows that true authority lies with him.

While the early Christian church was slowly developing its own identity, it was also becoming more distinct from Judaism. Followers of Jesus no longer saw their primary legislative source as the Torah. Instead, the Law was viewed by the light of the gospel and interpreted based on the teachings of Jesus. The early Christians were also finding their new executive and judicial center within the community of disciples (see for instance, 1 Corinthians 6:1-6). For its primary leadership, the Christian community looked to the “pillars” of the church – those who knew and were close to Jesus. Peter, James and John were the most notable of the apostles, but it was another James, the brother of Jesus, who was leader of the Jerusalem Christians, and thus de facto head of the Church. James was especially well respected and famous for being a very devout keeper of the Jewish traditions.

Paul was right at the center of the tensions between the old and the new. He had once been a proud upholder of traditional customs, but was now full of radical new insights as a result of meeting Jesus (Philippians 3:4-7). He was Jewish through and through, but God called him as an apostle to non-Jewish Gentiles. He had formerly been an accomplice in the death of leading Christians, but now Paul would do all he could to keep Christianity from cutting its own throat. Here in Galatians, the former Pharisee goes all out to keep Christianity from imploding under the weight of the same traditions and practices he once would have defended to the death.

READ GALATIANS 2: 1-10

PAUL GETS APPROVAL

Consider and Share: What are the most important teachings of the Church? How do we share them with those outside and inside our congregation? How important is it to reach new people for Christ? What church traditions or practices make it hard or even get in the way of reaching people outside the Church?

“In response to a revelation,” (vs. 2) in other words, God lets Paul know that it’s important to go back to Jerusalem to meet with the “acknowledged leaders” – the pillars of the church – in order to seek approval for the teaching he had been sharing in various congregations for the past fourteen years. His teaching had been controversial enough that there was active resistance from people Paul calls “false believers.” Apparently they had complained to the leaders in Jerusalem about the liberties allowed by Paul. As Paul characterizes it, they were jealous of their freedoms in Christ, and wanted to enslave them (vs. 4).

READ Luke’s account of this episode in Acts 15:1-35. Notice that some of those within the Christian community also identify themselves as (Jewish) Pharisees (vs. 5). Notice also that it is Peter who stands up and gives a compelling defense of Paul’s teaching (vs. 7-11). Like Paul, Peter had also received a revelation from God that Gentiles should be embraced and included within the Christian faith (Acts 10). Peter himself had brought word of the conversion of these first Gentile believers, Cornelius and his household, to the Jerusalem leadership (Acts 11).

In Galatians 2: 7-10, Paul tells us that he did in fact receive official approval from the leaders at Jerusalem, both for his overall commission to go to the Gentiles and for his teaching. Acts 15 confirms this. However, there are some differences in what Paul tells us in Galatians and what Luke tells us in Acts.

Consider and Share: What seems to be Paul’s attitude toward the Jerusalem leaders and their authority? What differences do you see in these accounts? Compare, for example, Galatians 1:2 with Acts 15:6, and Galatians 2:10 with Acts 15:20. What could explain the discrepancies in these accounts?

PAUL vs. PETER IN ANTIOCH

READ GALATIANS 2: 11-14

“Balaam’s ass was wiser than the prophet himself (Numbers 22:21-35). If God spoke then through an ass against a prophet, why should he not be able even now to speak through a righteous man against the pope? Similarly, St. Paul rebukes St. Peter as a man in error in Galatians 2. Therefore it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error.” -- Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*

Consider and Share: Have you ever had to call someone out who had more authority than you? Explain. In confronting Peter, what was Paul most worried about? What is the danger of not confronting those who are doing wrong? What examples do we see today of powerful people going unopposed? When does a “whistleblower” have the right or duty to speak out?

Paul does not say how, why, or when Peter came to Antioch. If he was in the delegation that brought the letter from James (Acts 15:22), Luke surely would have mentioned it. Table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ was a custom in Antioch. By sitting down to eat together, they acknowledged each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and accepted one another as people loved and accepted by God. Though there were no written commands in the Torah against table fellowship between Jew and Gentile, it was a commonly observed custom (implied in Acts 10:28).

In the Gospels, the Pharisees are often angered and confused by Jesus' association with the "unclean" of their society. He even shared meals with tax-collectors and other "sinners!" Jesus understood what it meant socially to sit down and eat a meal with someone, therefore when he chose to eat with someone that was a part of the "underclass" he was crossing a social boundary in order to meet a spiritual need.

Anyway, Peter came to Antioch and observed their custom of eating with Christians of all backgrounds, Jew and Gentile. Then, some new people arrive "from James (Jerusalem)," people who oppose Paul's teaching. We don't know if they are the same "spies" mentioned in Galatians 2:4, but they apparently think all male believers should be circumcised. Suddenly, with this new crowd around him, Peter draws back and will no longer eat with the Gentile Christians.

Consider and Share: Was Paul right to confront Peter in public? Why or why not? Paul says Peter withdraws "out of fear" (vs. 12). What is he afraid of, and how is this an indication that something is wrong in the Church? Paul says Peter acts out of "hypocrisy" (vs. 13) and that it leads others to do so as well. Charged with being a hypocrite, what might Peter have said to defend his actions? What kinds of peer pressure exist within the church today?

PAUL DEFENDS THE GOSPEL:

DEAD TO THE LAW, ALIVE IN CHRIST

READ GALATIANS 2: 15-21

Paul continues his arguments in defense of the gospel addressing the Jewish assumption that they have a natural spiritual superiority to Gentiles. The presupposition is that Gentiles, being outside the chosen people and outside of God's covenant, are "sinners." Since Jews live under God's covenant, God sees them as his own children rather than sinners. They are to follow God's law, which for a Pharisee meant following more than just the laws handed down to Moses at Sinai, but also the "traditions of the ancestors" (see 1:14). Through living in the covenant and following the law, they supposed that they had obtained righteousness, in other words, that they were living a good and holy life which pleased God.

Paul, however, disagreed. He saw that God's favor and holy blessing came through faith in Christ, separate from one's works and way of life. Verse 16 echoes Psalm 143:2, "No one is righteous before

you.” Paul’s fundamental bombshell is this: WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN CHRIST, NOT BY WORKS OF THE LAW. For Paul, anyone who comes to know Christ will realize that righteousness, being “made right” with God, comes from having faith in Jesus. We must not think that anything we do contributes to our salvation or brings us closer to God. This can only come from God through faith.

CASE STUDY: JESUS AND THE LAW

READ Mark 10:17-27. *Consider and Share: How is this man trying to justify himself? What seems to be the attitude of Jesus toward the Law (commandments)? Why does Jesus give him the advice that he does? What is the Law NOT able to do? How are we at times like the rich young man?*

From his understanding of who Jesus is and what God has done through him, Paul develops a whole new perspective on our relationship with God. Our spiritual lives follow the pattern of Jesus: death and resurrection. Through faith, we die with Christ on the cross. We die to sin, to our old identity and way of life. We also die to our efforts to justify ourselves, which lead to us pretending we are something we’re not. Because our faith joins us to Christ and to Christ’s crucifixion, we know we will also join him in eternal life. This is all reflected in the Christian rite of baptism (Romans 6:1-11).

Therefore, since Christ’s death was for everyone, we all have the same standing before God. Everyone finds favor with God the same way...the only way -- through faith. This puts Paul and the pillars on equal footing. Jews, like Gentiles, must look to Christ to be made righteous. Gentiles are no longer outsiders, but fully included in the family of God. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Consider and Share: Does Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor” make a difference in who you “hang out” with? Should it? How does that command speak to the conflict between Peter and Paul? How does having Christ living in us (vs. 20) change the way we treat people? How does it change the way we view ourselves?

CLOSING: Luther teaches that we should practice dying and rising in Christ every day. By confessing our sins in faith, commending ourselves into God’s care, and falling asleep cheerfully and peacefully at night, we practice dying in Him each night. By rising each morning with a prayer of thanksgiving, crossing ourselves and inviting God to guide and watch over us each day, we are practicing our own resurrection. Join together in praying Luther’s evening prayer:

I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today, and I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

STUDY 3: CHURCH SET FREE

INTRODUCTION (read together)

The Church – the community of followers of Christ – brought new possibilities into the world. In the times between the Old and New Testament, Jews had rebelled against the foreign powers that occupied Judea. The Maccabean family had led a revolution that brought Jewish control of the promised land for 100 years. Then the Romans came in and established control and domination over their territory. The Jews would not see self-rule in the Holy Land again until the 20th century. The political climate of Paul’s day was leading to increased hostility between the Jews and the Romans with no end in sight. A generation after Paul, this tension would lead to war – Jerusalem’s devastation (Luke 23:28) and the temple’s destruction (Matthew 24:2), as foretold by Jesus.

Meanwhile, Christians saw an opportunity to build a new society from the ground up. God’s kingdom was under construction, and the Church was the construction site. The cornerstone would be, not the Law and the Prophets, but Jesus himself (Ephesians 2:20). They would be a community of disciples, living out the teachings of Jesus. The disciples would worship together, both at the temple and in homes. They would share goods in common, and make sure no one went without. (Acts 2:43-47). Their hope was to live peacefully within the Roman Empire under the radar of the authorities, until Christ came to bring an end to this world and finish constructing his kingdom.

As year after year passed by, issues began to come up that needed to be addressed. More and more the content of the gospel became codified, procedures of congregations became standardized, and versions of the life and teachings of Christ were written down in many forms, culminating in the four New Testament Gospels. The letter to the Galatians was written within this ferment.

THE SOURCE OF THE SPIRIT

READ GALATIANS 3:1-5

Consider and Share: What does Paul seem to be most frustrated about? Can you think of some frustrating instances of Christians seeming to forget their Christian teachings? Explain. How might having different understandings of faith make it hard for some Christians to work with others?

This passage shows how Paul sees the issue at hand as deeply spiritual. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that the Galatians are “bewitched” – possessed by an evil spirit. Behind their disregard for Paul’s teaching is something much more troubling -- a failure to appreciate the meaning of Christ’s death. Christ crucified on the cross was a picture of God’s love – showing the lengths He would go to give us what we could not earn ourselves. It was the basis of Paul’s gospel (1 Corinthians 2:2). In the cross, God emptied himself of His own power and glory for our sake (Philippians 2:5-11). Paul understands the cross as the basis for the new reality that Christians find themselves in. By looking to God to make us righteous instead of relying on ourselves, we empty ourselves of our own power and glory. Thus, we make room to receive the Holy Spirit (vs. 2), which guides us in living this new reality of faith.

Because the Galatians had been taught Paul’s gospel which laid all this out for them, he wonders how they could be falling backwards towards reliance on the law. His rhetorical question in 3:2 leads them to admit that their faith was what brought them the Holy Spirit, not following “the works of the law.” Presumably, when they first heard Paul’s gospel they experienced signs of the Spirit’s presence, showing God’s approval of them before they ever did any “works of the law.” So what then is the law for? Knowing the high regard that his opponents have for the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul will delve into the Law itself as he demonstrates its place in relation to faith and salvation.

THE INHERITANCE OF ABRAHAM

READ GALATIANS 3:6-18

Consider and Share: What ancestor in your family do you look back to as “head of the family?” What family rituals and traditions do you keep? What do you think Paul means by son or child of Abraham (vs. 7, 9)? What does Jesus mean by it (see Matthew 3:9)?

Abraham was kind of like the George Washington of the people of God. Early Christians and their Jewish counterparts knew well the story of this founding father of the faith. They knew God had given him a promise which was to be fulfilled, not in his lifetime but through his descendants. God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17): Abraham would be father of many nations, his descendants would inherit the Promised Land, and they would be a blessing to all others. Abraham’s part of the bargain was to make sure his people keep the covenant and circumcise each male.

In this section, Paul uses many Old Testament passages to support his position. At the same time, he passes over the story where God gives circumcision to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, to instead focus on an earlier version of the promise itself (Genesis 15). **LOOK UP the following Old Testament passages referenced here by Paul. Write the passage and indicate the verse in Galatians where Paul cites it:**

SCRIPTURE	PASSAGE	VERSE IN GAL 3
Genesis 12:7	_____	_____
Genesis 15:6	_____	_____
Leviticus 18:5	_____	_____
Deut. 21:23	_____	_____
Deut. 27:26	_____	_____
Habbakuk 2:4	_____	_____

Paul’s Old Testament interpretations are bold and original. He is the first to take the passage about Abraham’s faith being counted as righteousness, and set it against the law. Some Jewish interpretations

of this passage assume that because Abraham believed, God knew he was able to be obedient and would keep the law, and therefore considered him righteous. The Jewish teacher Ben Sirach who lived around 200 B.C., for instance, assumed Abraham lived in keeping with the law:

“Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
And no one has been found like him in glory;
He kept the law of the Most high,
And was taken into covenant with him;
He established the covenant in his flesh,
And when he was tested was found faithful.”

-- Ben Sirach 44:19-20

And this obedience was assumed by others to be the basis of his favored status with God:

“Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?”
-- 1 Maccabees 2:50-52

Paul sidesteps these earlier understandings of the passage about Abraham’s faith, and gives it a new spin. Instead of leading Abraham into a life under the Law, Paul sees Abraham’s belief as a preview of the gospel. His unique and radical conclusion is that anyone who believes can be considered a descendant of Abraham. Talk about tearing down boundaries! In other words, it is *and always has been* your faith in God which makes you a part of the family of God’s blessed and beloved children, not your ethnic heritage, cultural background, way of life, etc. Anyone can belong to “the club” if they have faith.

This will lead to the conclusion that Jews, who have been distinguishing themselves from “Gentile sinners” (vs. 2:15), actually stand on exactly the same footing before God as those Gentiles. Only faith in Christ brings the Spirit and leads to justification and righteousness. Unless you let go of the illusion that you are a “good” person with righteousness of your own, you stand outside the promise. Whether Jew or Gentile, until you see that you too are a sinner in need of the grace and mercy God gives through his Son Jesus, you have missed the blessing.

This idea stands behind Paul’s innovative concept of the law being a curse. Here again Paul gives us a unique re-interpretation of a traditional Jewish concept. Where the Law had been (and still is) seen in traditional Judaism as a blessing and gift from God, Paul tells us that the law can actually lead us away from salvation. He does this in vs. 10 and vs. 13, by bringing together 2 verses from the Law about curses. First, he interprets Deuteronomy 27:26 in an extremely literal manner to mean that every bit of the law must be followed entirely, or else the person trying to follow it is cursed. Then he applies Deuteronomy 21:23 to Christ’s crucifixion, connecting curse and cross by asserting that Jesus took on the curse by “hanging” on the cross (tree). So by taking the “curse” of the law upon himself, Jesus takes it off of those who believe in him, freeing them from the curse of trying to follow its unachievable orders.

Paul keeps drawing new and unusual conclusions from the Scripture verses he collects in this section. By noting that passages about the inheritance from Abraham (for instance, Genesis 12:7, 13:15) indicate that it will go to his “seed” or “offspring” (singular) rather than all of his “offsprings,” he concludes that they refer to Abraham’s offspring, Christ (vs. 16). In the original context of those verses, however, the “offspring” being referred to is probably Isaac, or perhaps Israel as representative of the Jews as a whole. Then in vs. 17, Paul distinguishes the Promise (the Blessing given to Abraham’s descendants in Genesis 15) from “the law which came 420 years later” (the Law given to Moses on Sinai, Exodus 20). Paul argues (vs. 18) that because the promise came first, it alone is the true inheritance of God’s people.

Consider and Share: What do you think of Paul's arguments in this section? Are they convincing to you? How do you think his contemporaries reacted to his line of reasoning?

FROM LAW TO FAITH

READ GALATIANS 3:19-29

Consider and Share: How are laws important to the functioning of our society? What laws could we do without? How are people imprisoned by sin? What examples can you think of?

Paul finally deals with a key question raised by his gospel: if Christ is the source of the Promise and faith in Him brings righteousness and justification before God, what's the Law for? Although it is a gift from God, it is inferior to the promise. It was not given directly, but "added" because of sin. The Promise came straight from God, but the Law was given through a mediator (Moses) and "ordained through angels" (vs. 19, see Acts 7:53).

It turns out that the Law was just given as our temporary babysitter, a "pedagogue" or schoolmaster whose job was to keep order and watch over us until Christ came. This babysitter was a harsh disciplinarian who scolded us and kept us penned up. Now that we have faith and Jesus is with us, everything has changed. We are free from the clutches of the slow-witted schoolmaster, and in the hands of the Master himself. Our baptisms into Christ have changed us as radically as Saul was changed to Paul on the Damascus road. We are now "clothed with Christ" – such that when we look at each other, it is Christ we see. Jew and Greek, slave and free, rich and poor, young and old are all welcome at the table. We all belong to Christ and the Promise is ours. This new reality and our new identity matter more than any distinction.

Consider and Share: How can the rules and commandments of the Law lead us to Christ? How might they drive us away from Him? Once freed by faith, why would anyone want to go back to the Law? What other barriers are eliminated for those who are "clothed with Christ"? How does the Church today live out its freedom from worldly distinctions? How are we still caught up in life under the Law?

CLOSING: Go around the group and let each person name something they have been set free from in Christ and something they need strength to become or to overcome. You may put it in this form:

Lord Jesus, I thank you that by your grace you set me free from _____ . By your Spirit, help me to _____ . Amen

STUDY 4: GROWN-UP CHILDREN OF GOD

INTRODUCTION (read together)

People in the Paul's time had multiple options when it came to faith and religion. Some who joined the Galatian churches Paul had founded had been pagans. Most likely, they had worshipped the ancient Celtic gods of their ancestors, which had been sanitized and re-imagined as officially approved versions of the Greco-Roman gods. This was the everyday piety found in outlying areas of the empire. Then this strange man comes through town. He has a Jewish background, but he speaks of a Savior who was sent by the one God to save all people. He tells them that this Savior, the Messiah Jesus, died for them, and comes to them just as they are. They are filled with awe, wonder, and a longing for the grace this Savior offers to them.

Pagan worship involved prayer, devotion, and service to chosen deities. The gods were not particularly interested in the success and happiness of their worshipers. They ordinarily did not seek out a relationship with their followers. They were, however, interested in the attention and worship that their devotees would send their way, which presumably increased the gods' power in the divine world. Pagans would make sacrifices, donations and offerings, pledge special vows, pilgrimages, and feats of devotion to give honor to the gods they worshiped. The more they served these gods, the more likely they thought they were to receive a favor or blessing from their god.

From the point of view of Judaism and Christianity, there can be only one God, so whatever it is these pagans are worshipping, it couldn't be a real "god," certainly not in the way God is God. If pagan gods aren't gods, what are they? Paul doesn't say they don't exist, or are figments of their imagination. The opinion he gives in this chapter: they are "elemental spirits," false gods masquerading as powerful beings, demonic entities feeding off their devotions and offerings, keeping them addicted and imprisoned in cyclic demands of worship (vs. 4:10). Paul reminds the Galatians of how terrible their spiritual lives were before they came to faith in Christ. Then comes the shocker: by following this "other gospel" they have walked away from freedom and gone right back to their cells and shackles.

FROM IMPRISONED SLAVES TO CHILDREN AND HEIRS

READ GALATIANS 4:1-11

Consider and Share: What privilege of adulthood meant the most to you when you obtained it? If you could relive an event or moment in the past, what would you do over? What does the idea of being a "child of God" mean to you?

Paul finally begins to deal directly with the questions (listed back on page 5) that naturally arise from his gospel. He likens the spiritual condition of those under the law to the situation of a child due to inherit a large estate. That child doesn't really have access to or control over all the wealth he is set to inherit. Instead, he is ruled by guardians and subject to decisions made by the appointed trustees of the estate. He has no more freedom at this point than a slave.

Contrast this with the gift of faith in Christ. Although the Galatians had been pagans, through faith they were adopted into God’s family and made children and heirs, fully equivalent to the “natural” children (John 1:12). The right to call God “Father” (Abba) just as Jesus did (for instance, in the Lord’s prayer), was theirs (Romans 8:15). So was freedom from the guardian/trustee/disciplinarian/babysitter that was the Law.

Turning back to the Law, therefore, is a rejection of this adoption and a return to slavery. It is every bit as pagan and idolatrous as the life they lived before they met Paul. By offering God obedience to the law instead of faith, sacrifices instead of “a right spirit” (Psalm 51:16-17), compulsively observing “special days” (vs. 10) and rituals instead of bringing God the love of their hearts, the Galatians are essentially living a pagan life with Christian trappings. They have gone back to feeding those “elemental spirits” that entrap human hearts and lead them away from God.

READ Colossians 2:8-23. Here again we see Paul battling against teachings that place ritualistic demands on new disciples – circumcision, food rules, and “special days” (festivals, new moons, etc.). Again, he characterizes these things as slavery to the elemental spirits of the universe. We know that so-called “Gnostic” sects sprang up during these times. These were hybrid religions – strange mixtures of Christianity, Judaism, paganism, philosophy, and Eastern religions. Perhaps Paul’s opponents were part of this movement.

Consider and Share: What is the difference between celebrating the liturgical calendar (including Christmas and Easter), and what the Galatians were doing? What differences in attitudes and goals do you see between Paul and the false teachers?

CASE STUDY: JESUS AND THE LAW

READ Matthew 23:1-9, 13-15, 23-26. *Consider and Share: How were the Pharisees imprisoned by their use of the Law? How were they imprisoning others? Jesus is not very “politically correct” in his speech to them. Why is he being so harsh? What is at stake here?*

MOTHER PAUL’S BIRTH PANGS

READ GALATIANS 4:12-20

Consider and Share: What is most difficult about being a parent? How should parents deal with children who are rejecting their parents’ values? When have you seen your relationship with God slip from being a child of the Father to a matter of keeping rules? Why does that happen? How would your lifestyle be different if you did not know God?

Here in this section, Paul turns away from his argument to become intensely personal. His strong emotional attachment to his congregations pours out on the page as he begs the Galatians to “become like him” as he became like them (see 1 Corinthian 9:19-23). He refers to a physical infirmity which the Galatians bore graciously. [Could this have been a problem with his eyes, as vs. 15 suggests? Could it be Paul’s mysterious “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7)?]

He reminds them of the respect they had for him then, treating him with such kindness and hospitality, you’d have thought he was an angel from heaven -- as if he were Christ Himself. Why has all this changed? he wonders... Don’t you love me anymore? Sounding first like a jealous lover, then like a neglected mother (see also 1 Thessalonians 2:7), Paul reveals his distress at the way they seem to be deserting him. If only he could be there with them and address them face-to-face...

Consider and Share: What stages has your faith life gone through? How is it different today than it was when you were a child? Who nourished and nurtured your faith? Did you go through any radical changes in the understanding of your relationship with God? Has your physical health played a part in your faith or discipleship? Explain. Paul is passionate about growing and guiding the faith of these early disciples. How can we as a congregation show this same passion and concern for those learning or struggling with faith?

THE JERUSALEM ABOVE

READ GALATIANS 4:21-31

Consider and Share: What do you remember of the story of Abraham and Sarah? What is the birth story of Ishmael and Isaac? (feel free to review Genesis 16:1-4; 18:10-14; 21:1-10) How would you have reacted to Sarah’s offer to bear a child from her handmaid? How did it turn out?

In this section, Paul relates the Law and the gospel to two conceptions of Jerusalem. The covenant of the Law is represented as the earthly city we see and know. The heavenly Jerusalem which is our true home (“our mother,” vs. 26) is the covenant of grace in Christ. These Paul relates to Abraham’s story, drawing the following parallels and contrasts:

<u>LAW</u>	<u>GOSPEL</u>
Earthly Jerusalem	Heavenly Jerusalem
Covenant given from Sinai	Freedom given from the cross
Hagar (the bondwoman)	Sarah (the freewoman)
Ishmael	Isaac
Makes us slaves	Makes us legitimate children

Paul sees parallels between life under the law and the story of Abraham’s sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was son of the slave woman Hagar and born “according to the flesh” (that is, in the normal,

human way). Isaac, son of the free woman (Abraham's true and beloved wife Sarah) was born "according to the promise" (under God's blessing, in fulfillment of God's promise, and miraculously, when his parents were too old to have children). Normally, Jews would see Sarah as their spiritual mother and Hagar as the spiritual mother of the Gentiles, but Paul completely reverses this picture. He radically reorients the heart of the faith towards Christ, dismissing the covenant of the law and ritual traditions of Judaism just as Abraham dismissed his wife's handmaiden (vs. 30).

Similarly, the law is meant for the discipline and regulation of human life of the flesh, untransformed by faith in Christ. Life under the law is slavery inasmuch as its adherents are bound by sin and not free to serve God. The life of faith, on the other hand, is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. It is the freedom to live for God.

Consider and Share: How do you think the Gentile Galatians would have reacted to the comparisons Paul sets up in this passage? What would their false teachers have thought of it? Does this passage strengthen Paul's argument? Why or why not? How might Paul's arguments be used to today to strengthen the Church? Has your joy in Christ ever been crushed by someone's judgmentalism? What difference will the fact of God's favor and the fullness of his Spirit make a difference in your life this week?

CLOSING: Have different people read the following verses and prayer --

Person 1:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Person 2:

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Person 3:

We thank you, heavenly Father, that we may come to you as your children. Give us the joy in our hearts of sons and daughters who have just received their inheritance.

Person 4:

Help us bring that joy into every relationship and every action. Give us constant awareness of your presence, your grace, and your love. Help us share them with all we meet, and see your face in theirs.

ALL:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil, for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

STUDY 5: THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS

INTRODUCTION (read together)

When did we become free? Who or what made us a free people? As far as our civil freedoms as Americans go, we look back to July 4, 1776 and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. But who chose that moment as the marker of our identity? Why not choose some other date, like July 2, the date that the declaration was actually written? Or why not the date when the American Revolution was officially over, or the day George Washington was elected president? There were many possibilities we could have chosen to recognize and celebrate as that one decisive moment which marked the beginning of the United States.

For Paul, however, looking back to the point where our Christian freedoms began and from which they all flow, there was only the single indisputable event of Christ's death on the cross. To be sure, the Judaism he had grown up with taught that the Law – not just the ethical commandments, but also the stories and rituals it contained, was the key to freedom. With too much confidence in being “children of Abraham,” the Jews felt secure in knowing their place in God's heart as heirs of his promise and members of his “covenant community.” The prophets were always contending with the apathy and injustice that grew out of this sense of spiritual entitlement. Finally, John the Baptist in Matthew 3:8-9, reveals their attitude as an illusion: “...do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”

Paul wants the Galatians to get it right when it comes to understanding their new spiritual freedoms in Christ. These freedoms are not earned by good behavior, innate abilities, or having the right lineage. They are not linked to race, geography, culture or language. Instead, they come from the cross of Jesus and flow out to all people equally. Paul's spirited declaration that “for freedom Christ has set us free” may sound like a circular argument, but it is an important recognition that freedom is not a static state, tied to a single, unmoving moment in time. When Christ died on the cross for us, he set us free FROM something, but also FOR something. Yes, by faith we are saved from sin, death, and the devil, but he did not throw open the gates of a penitentiary so all the hardened criminals could go back to their lives of crime. We are given our first chance to live in a true state of freedom, a new life and a new future, led by the Spirit into places we've never been.

So now Paul, recognizing how radical this is, wants to show us what true freedom looks like and how we can live into it. In Christ, God has done a truly new thing. In our baptisms, we are “clothed with Christ” and offered the possibility of life in God's love without the demands and burdens of the Law. For Paul, this life lived in justified and sanctified relationship with God is salvation. He wrestles with the implications of it all through the rest of Galatians, and will continue to work out the fuller and somewhat clearer vision of salvation which we find in Romans.

FROM LAW TO LOVE

READ GALATIANS 5:1-12

Consider and Share: What freedoms do we enjoy as Americans? What liberties are we NOT given as U.S. citizens? What freedoms do we have as Christians? What are we NOT free to do as people of God?

Paul's concerns in this letter go way beyond the issue of circumcision. He exposes the basic inconsistency of a people trying to win God's favor through their actions, after Christ has already won it for them on the cross. His underlying frustration is that if the Galatians accept circumcision, they are missing the whole point of the cross. By offering himself on the cross as the final sacrifice for our sins, Jesus set us free FROM sin, FROM death, and FROM the devil. He also sets us free FROM anything that binds us – including any absolute obligations to the state or to any tradition (religious or otherwise) -- basically anything else that would make us into “slaves.” If we belong to God, then nothing else can or should possess us.

Martin Luther in his fight against distorted Roman Catholic traditions, applied this notion of freedom to the vows taken by monks like himself. A fugitive hiding out from assassins, he wrote his 1521 pamphlet *On Monastic Vows* to put a Biblical perspective on the system that he himself was part of, of monks serving in isolated monasteries, kept under strict regulations of obedience, poverty, and chastity. He points out that keeping the monks hidden away in monasteries makes it impossible to serve their neighbors and tend to their own families. Their vows are an assault to the pact of freedom God made with them at baptism. To be sure we understand the power and source of that freedom, Luther calls it “evangelical freedom,” – the freedom of the gospel:

“Paul is asserting evangelical freedom when he says in Galatians 1:8, “But if an angel or someone else from heaven were to teach anything other than what you have heard, let him be anathema.” And later, “You, brethren, are called to freedom” (Galatians 5:13). And again, “He that is unsettling your minds, whoever he be, will bear his judgment” (Galatians 5:10). You can take it from this that no man may teach or permit anything that is against evangelical freedom. This freedom comes from divine authority. God ordained it. He will never revoke it. He can neither accept anything that runs counter to it, nor allow anyone to violate it even by the most insignificant ordinance...Everything not specifically commanded by God is abrogated and made a matter of free choice...”

He concludes that, since people are not commanded to make monastic vows, they are against God's will and all monks should be free of them. However, this does not release them from obligations to love their neighbors, just as evangelical freedom does not give married people permission to break their wedding vows. Luther writes, “In granting you this freedom, God does not prevent you from putting yourself under obligation or binding yourself to your neighbor. Otherwise, it would even be permissible to make and break all contracts, agreements, and treaties at will. Therefore in matrimony, you are already given over to the claim and authority of another.”

How do we know what constitutes a God-pleasing life in our post-Easter world? We look to God's Spirit which we find through faith. The Spirit accompanies us in the Christian life, guiding us and empowering us to follow. Our struggle to be righteous is not one of striving to keep the Law, but in following the Spirit into works of love. By doing this, we become part of God's new creation (compare 5:6 & 6:15).

Consider and Share: By using images of freedom and slavery, Paul describes the Christian life as the opposite of life under the Law. Are his arguments in vs. 2 and 3 convincing? Is it all or nothing? Can one keep some of the Law's commands without seeking to be justified by it? What would you say to someone who claims that the Old Testament contains Ceremonial Law which was removed, and the Moral Law (including the 10 Commandments) which we still have to keep? What is Paul's point in vs. 7-8? How can the Galatians tell that the “other gospel” is not from God? How does our freedom in Christ relate to the Old Testament commands and traditions related to tithing? to sacrifices? to dietary restrictions? to keeping the Sabbath? to homosexuality? to caring for the poor and the stranger?

FLESH vs. SPIRIT

READ GALATIANS 5:13-18

Having established that life under God's grace is free of the Law, Paul now sets out to show us what that life looks like. He turns from theology to ethics, laying out the behaviors common to those who have moved from flesh to spirit. Every Christian is a new creation, living by the Spirit. This is not a spirit of indulgence that gives us permission to do whatever we want, whatever feels good, or whatever improves our own situation. This is a Spirit of love that owes absolute obedience to a single law: Love your neighbor.

For Paul, even something like circumcision which hardly gives any physical pleasure, can be a sinful self-indulgence which opposes the law of love. He sees that there is a "spiritual yardstick" being used to see who measures up. Those who were circumcised could feel superior to those who weren't. This is how Paul could say that the "other gospel" of his opponents led the Galatians away from the Spirit and back to the flesh.

But the Spirit leads us to love (Leviticus 19:18; John 13:34-35; 15:12-17). It breaks up our personal prejudices and self-serving religious habits, and instead seeks the good of the community. It helps those who are different find a way beyond their hostilities and establishes them in fellowship. As individual Christians under the cross each becomes a new creation in Christ, so does the community they create when they come together -- the new creation we call the Church.

Consider and Share: What "spiritual yardsticks" are used to see if people in the church measure up? When new people come to church, are some treated differently from others? Why? What kinds of "biting and devouring" (vs. 15) go on in congregations? What are some good antidotes to judging others?

THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

READ GALATIANS 5:19-26

Paul's portrait of life "in step with the Spirit" (vs. 25, NIV) is vividly contrasted with a life of sinful indulgence. Those whose lives display "the fruits of the Spirit" have "crucified their flesh with its passions and desires" (vs. 24). In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster gives a list of traditional practices to aid in spiritual growth. These include the inward practices of meditation, prayer,

fasting and study; outward practices of simplicity, solitude, submission and service, and corporate disciplines of confession, worship, guidance and celebration.

Consider and Share: What “works of the flesh” in vs. 19-21 have you struggled with in your walk with God? Since we are not under the law, what is wrong with indulging our sinful nature once in a while? What disciplines and practices have you found helpful in keeping in step with God’s Spirit? Write your personal definition below for each of the “fruit of the Spirit.” Circle the one you feel the strongest. Underline the one you wish you had more of. Write the name of a person who exemplifies each one for you.

<i>THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT</i>	<i>DEFINITION</i>	<i>PERSON</i>
<i>Love</i>		
<i>Joy</i>		
<i>Peace</i>		
<i>Patience</i>		
<i>Kindness</i>		
<i>Goodness</i>		
<i>Faithfulness</i>		
<i>Gentleness</i>		
<i>Self-Control</i>		

CLOSING: Get with a partner and share with them what “fruit of the Spirit” you see in each other. Pray a prayer thanking God for those qualities. If you are both willing to share the fruit you wish you had more of, pray that God helps your partner increase in that blessing.

STUDY 6: LIVING IN THE SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION (read together)

Luther's affection for this letter to the Galatians was so great, he nicknamed it after his wife and called it "my Katie." This was where he found ease for his troubled conscience by discovering the "Christian righteousness" that we have through faith. It is this righteousness that makes our works good, not the other way around. Since it comes from Christ himself, we never have to worry about being "good enough" for God.

What wouldn't Luther love about this letter? After all, the struggles of Paul and Luther were similar in many ways. They had both been dedicated to the "traditions of their forebears – Paul as a Pharisee and Luther as a monk – but had both undergone an intense realignment of their beliefs. Both had been attacked and suffered bodily danger for preaching the gospel. Both were passionate about communicating their new understanding of Scripture and doctrine based on a radical understanding of God's grace. Both see Christ and the cross at the heart of this understanding, and both viewed works without faith as a loss of freedom – a return to the kind of bondage suffered by pagans and atheists.

Imagine how comforting it must have been to Luther, who was being opposed by all the great scholars of his day, as well as the pope and his representatives, to read Paul's own account of his challenge to status quo religion in Antioch and Jerusalem. What a relief to see that even the "saints" of the early church called each other out over disagreements on essential matters. How reassuring to see how one individual Christian with the guidance of the Spirit could influence the outlook of the entire church. Paul's example was not such a relief because it revealed a path without suffering, but because it showed how standing up for the truth and fighting for what's right for all is worth it in the end.

Paul's vision (and Luther's) is a blueprint for an inclusive church. We see faith, grace, and justification leveling out the difference between those with different traditions and practices, but also between those of different cultures, races, genders, and gender-identities. Rich and poor, privileged and oppressed, strong and weak, old and young – all these things disappear as distinctions between human beings living in Christ. Existing power-structures come under the critique of the gospel, especially when they show favoritism to some and leave others out. Who gets a say and who has the power within the church will be constant problems where power is not guided by spiritual insight.

Galatians is a goldmine of inspiration for the church of today. However, much of the gold still lies underground. Just as many Americans seem unaware of the preciousness of the freedoms they enjoy on a daily basis, many Christians have no idea how much God's grace frees and empowers them to live in new ways. Paul concludes his letter by continuing to enlighten the Galatians as to what this new life looks like. He writes his conclusion in large letters, pledging his allegiance to the cross of Jesus, the marks of which he bears proudly on his own worn and abused body.

Consider and Share: What parts and passages of Galatians have spoken to you most profoundly? Do you have a favorite section? Explain. What does the letter to the Galatians say to you about the freedoms and abilities God has given you? In what ways have you been living under the Law instead enjoying the freedom of the gospel in your life? What does Galatians have to say about the "priesthood of believers"? How would you relate what you have learned in Galatians to baptism and the Lord's Supper?

FROM JUSTIFICATION TO JUSTICE

READ GALATIANS 6:1-6

Consider and Share: What should be done when members of the church...neglect coming to church? ...show hostility to other members?...live a publicly immoral life?...regularly express unscriptural opinions? Do verses 2 and 5 contradict each other? Why or why not? Name several ways Christians can bear the burdens...of fellow church members, ...of new attenders to worship, ...of people in their surrounding neighborhood,...of the poor in the community, ... of the sick and suffering?. What other groups in your neighborhood have particular burdens to bear?

CASE STUDY: JESUS AND THE LAW

READ John 8:1-11. *Consider and Share: What is Jesus' attitude toward the Law in this passage? How does he make use of it to teach the woman? How does he make use of it to teach her captors? What does he teach us about Christian freedom and Christian love?*

Throughout Paul's writings, the justification of the Christian before God is the cornerstone of the new life God enables us to live. The early Lutherans made it the cornerstone of their founding document, Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession. But justification has often been seen as simply a component of conversion, a remnant of our baptism that has little effect on our daily life. It's treated like the virus-protection program you downloaded to your laptop which runs quietly in the background, necessary but invisible.

Compare this with the view of Church of God pastor and professor Kimberly Majeski, who writes:

...as a very young child, I felt connected, felt at home in the company of a people who were committed to human rights and dignity, who believed in Paul's words that Christ had made us one, who acknowledged there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal 3:26-28). This sense of unity, holiness, and justice seemed to resonate deep in my bones and, in some ways, defined me and my place in the world.

It wasn't until later that I'd learn about the great Holiness revivals of the late nineteenth century, that I'd learn about sisters and brothers who were born of the same water and fire. All of us are descended from John Wesley's Methodism. The Free Methodists had broken off because they believed the poor should not be excluded from worship if they couldn't pay dues; the Wesleyans had separated during the fight for the abolition of slavery; and my own tradition distinguished itself over the insistence of inclusion, believing that all are welcome at the table of the Lord.

As I have matured, have studied, have grown, I have wondered about those early days, about the passions and call that drove us forward that seem to have been all but lost across the last century. I wonder where the fire that burned during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s has gone; where we lost our way in the fight for gender equality; how it is that we have been silent on issues of justice, have forgotten the poor and the alien in our midst. Instead, there has been much talk of justification, taking Augustine's perspective on justification as conversion. We have busied ourselves winning souls for their safe keeping in the afterlife with no attention to living in such a way that we might make this world a better, more just existence.

This is a misunderstanding of the Pauline notion of justification, at best, and a complete and total missional estrangement, at worst. For Paul, justification cannot exist without justice, and the justice of God is worked out on this earth through the people of God who live and love as Jesus (1 Cor 15). As God's creatures, we are saved to do the work of God in the world, to partner with God in setting all things right.

Indeed, some churches are so focused on justification that their whole ministry revolves around evangelism, which they tend to understand as simply gaining conversions for Christ and worshippers for the pews. Other churches are so focused on justice issues they spend all their energies advocating for political causes, organizing in the community, and doing works of social justice. Brought to the extreme, both patterns of church life end up cutting the cord between justification and justice.

Consider and share: How is evangelism related to community service? What acts of justice do you see the church doing? What areas of social justice seem to be neglected in the church? In what ways should the church stand with those who are oppressed or in need? Where do you see greater need for connection between justification and justice?

FROM NOW TILL HARVEST TIME

READ GALATIANS 6:7-10

This paragraph includes a warning and an encouragement, all tied together with an agricultural image. What is sown has a direct relationship on what is reaped. Whatever we do now resonates in eternity. All Paul's cheerleading for Christian freedom is not in any way a license to go crazy and do whatever you feel like. We are set free FOR something – a kind of freedom that gives witness to the Spirit. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) leads into the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). Just as evangelism naturally leads to discipleship and justification leads to justice, justified disciples working for the good of all can expect full fellowship in eternity (Matthew 25:40).

Consider and share: What is Paul warning against? What is Paul encouraging? Who are "those of the family of faith" (literally: "members of the household of faith"), and why does Paul single them out? As you reflect on what you have "sown" this year, what kind of crop are you expecting to harvest...weeds? ...beautiful flowers? ...spindly little plants? ...a bumper crop? Why? What can you do this week to "sow" in the Spirit?

PAUL'S HANDWRITTEN CLOSING:

AN INVITATION TO A NEW CREATION

READ GALATIANS 6:11-18

Paul closes by doing 3 things:

1. He returns to the issue at hand and the opponents who are teaching circumcision. It may seem like, at times in this letter, Paul has left them far behind and ranged into territory far outside the scope of this basic conflict. In fact, that issue has never been far away. His whole effort has been to show how someone who would require circumcision is either ignorant of or ignoring the spiritual consequences of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Here, Paul directly accuses them of deliberately ignoring the truth of the gospel in order to enhance their own reputation (vs. 12) and protect their own positions (vs. 13). They are using the Galatians (vs. 14) as pawns in their own personal power games.
2. He contrasts this to his own motives, which he claims are purely focused on the cross. He claims no worldly motives, since he and the world have been "crucified" to each other. He offers a final perspective of his position, that ultimately the issue itself is a small thing in comparison with the new creation that we are in Christ (see 5:6, also 2 Corinthians 5:16-17).
3. He offers a blessing in closing, first upon all who agree with him (vs. 16) whom he counts in the fellowship of "the Israel of God," and finally upon all the Galatians (vs. 18). In between he places a warning or curse of sorts, identifying his external, physical sufferings with the sufferings of Jesus himself. This is a trump card Paul has played in other places (for instance, 2 Corinthians 11:24-33), but the point is to show the level of commitment he has to the gospel in contrast to the corrupted motives of his opponents.

At the end of it all, we are left with a bold and passionate witness of a faith that matters. Trust in Christ has real consequences, both in the kinds of values you live every day, and for the kind of community you seek to create.

Consider and Share: What does Paul mean about being crucified to the world (vs. 14)? How does this happen? Where do you see the values and ideas of our modern society most in conflict with the values and ideas of the gospel? What are the strongest temptations to tamper with the gospel or water it down? What is a stronger witness to the gospel – suffering or success? Why? After reading this letter, how would you describe the Apostle Paul? Is he someone you'd like to meet? Why or why not? What would he say to the church of today? In one sentence, how would you summarize the message of Galatians?

CLOSING: Divide a piece of paper into 3 sections. Spend 5 minutes silently contemplating how the Holy Spirit is leading you to boldly put your faith into action. Write down one action God is calling you to make in the first section of your paper. In the second section, make a list of people or groups of people who have heavy burdens to bear. In the third section, write a verse from Galatians. If you wish, share what you wrote with the group. Carry this paper with you this week, praying through it at least once a day. Close by praying for each other and end with the Lord's Prayer.