

Identity: A Study in Galatians – Free People

Scripture:

Read Galatians 5:1-9, 13-16

Introduction:

We're 4-weeks into a series through Galatians, taking a deep dive into the Apostle Paul's understanding of what Christian identity looks like, acts like, and lives like. Galatians 5 offers a unique vantage point on Christian identity through the lens of *freedom*.

We live in a cultural moment where personal freedom and autonomy might be considered "cultural orthodoxy." Freedom serves as the guiding principle behind our modern pursuits of happiness and satisfaction as well as our dismissal of outside authority structures. In an effort to avoid all concepts of absolute truth, we've said that nothing and no one has any rightful claim on us. What makes me happy is what is true. The new arbiter of truth has become the independent self – so that "freedom" can now be defined as the absence of any limitations or constraints.

Throughout the letter of Galatians, Paul has been battling against the Judaizers, a group of Jewish Christian legalists who insisted that Gentile Christians had to accept the sign of circumcision in order to be included in Christian community. In fact, some were insisting that Gentiles had to receive the sign of circumcision in order to be saved (see Acts 15). Like a mother bear protecting her cubs, the Apostle Paul defends the young Galatian church as well as the purity of the gospel. The "leaven" of merit-based salvation was eroding the Galatian's confidence in salvation by grace through faith alone. If circumcision was necessary for someone to be saved, then Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was insufficient in-and-of-itself. And this meant that Christians weren't free people. How can we be free if there's still more work to be done to earn God's favor?

To this, Paul boldly announces, "*I say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.*" Syncretism isn't an option. It's either all-Jesus or no-Jesus. Paul goes on to show this young church that what matters isn't what you bring to the table, but "*faith working through love.*" (v. 6) Love, then, becomes the sign of freedom in action. Yes, as believers we are free from earning God's favor through our own rituals. Because Christ served us to the point of death on the cross, we're now free – but free to love and serve others as He served us. Only free people can give freely. And only an identity shaped by the gospel can allow you to meet the needs of others before your own.

Reflection: Take personal inventory of your life, heart, and spiritual journey. Use these prompts as a way to prepare for group discussions, or for personal times of prayer.

1. What does freedom mean to you? How would the community around you define it?
2. What does enslavement mean to you? How would the community around you define it?

Discuss:

1. What about the sermon stood out or impacted you the most? Do you have any follow up questions about the sermon?
2. The Judaizers insisted that there was something else the Gentile Christians had to do in order to be saved. We've all got differing "salvation strategies" – things we cling to for meaning, happiness, or a sense of control and power. What are yours? What are the broader "salvation narratives" within broader society?
3. Consider Paul Tripp's quote: "*You are perfect in the eyes of God because the perfect righteousness of Christ has been attributed to your spiritual account. You are righteous before God even in those moments when what you are doing is not righteous. You measure up in his eyes even on those days when you don't measure up, because Jesus measured up on your behalf.*" Discuss how a firm belief in the sufficiency of Jesus as the source of your identity might shape you.
4. Re-read verses 13-16. Paul emphasizes that Christian freedom is both freedom *from* the curse of the law; but it's also a freedom *for* the common good of our neighbors. Christian identity by its very nature drives us back into society in order to meet the needs of people around us. What could this look like for you / your group?

Apply:

This week, pay close attention to your thoughts, ideas, day dreams, nervous energy, agitations, emotions, and mood swings. What patterns do you see underneath all of these? Record your findings. You're looking for things that control you – ideas, people, circumstances – that have your heart. "*For freedom Christ has set you free.*" Don't allow these things to become your "salvation strategies." As verse 16 says, "walk by Spirit" and invite the Lord to shape, shift, and re-order what you find *so that* you can be more *free* to love and serve those around you.