

Two months ago now, we began our journey into this short letter to the faith families of Galatia, what one pastor describing this short letter as a “little bomb; it has dynamite in it.”¹ The explosive nature of Paul’s correspondence comes from the fact that it strikes at the heart of our human existence, igniting the dormant and suppressed embers of what it means to be fully human in relationship with our Creator: *free*.

Freedom is essential if you want to thrive and not merely survive the day. This is why the longing for freedom sparks revolutions among those who lack it and stirs up bravery and sacrifice in those who are committed not to lose it. Freedom is fundamental if we are to be entirely, unashamedly, joyously and without comparison in submission to the “easy yoke and light burden” crafted for us; the life God has breathed into us, gifted to us in partnership with him to be lived in our truest potential. While freedom is fundamental, it is not inevitable. More often than not, our experience of life is not as ones free in our God-image, God-related selves. What we most often experience is imprisonment, enslaved to sin, entangled in the systems (religious or otherwise) of relating to God, ourselves, and others that perpetuate the problem, not solve it.

Paul’s plea to the Galatians is that they would hold fast to freedom won for them, gifted to them through the person and work of Jesus Christ, summed up for Paul in the image of “Christ crucified.” When we understand our beginning and completion as coming through our sharing in Jesus’ crucifixion, a life gifted to us by the promise that God has overcome all that imprisons and will unequivocally wipe out all that continues to seek to enslave us once again; then we can live freely and lightly.

We can, as Abraham and his lineage, mature, grow into the fullness of our humanity (individually and collectively) in the freedom of living by faith; learning through and in our failures of the truth that God initiates and completes the promise of life; that he is just and lavishly merciful; that he is always working in the unseen and yet-to-be-known. But how? How do we not fall back into the bonds of trying to finish what God started, especially if we sincerely desire to *do* “religious” things like our faith practices that we talk about so much?

Remember, Paul is not arguing for a liberated life, a life free from connections and relationships, but a free life, a full life, in right relationship. So how do we remain free in our faith?

Well, according to Paul, we act like children. “Son or daughter is a word of relationship [, and] Freedom is the experience of being a person in relationship...It means being ourselves not in isolation but in relation—with God.”² *Because* our relationship to God is as children, not slaves or servants or sojourners, we, as Paul says, “are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (3:29). Unmediated by a guardian, a pedagogue, and custodian, nor managed by a steward as some unemancipated child, but fully matured heirs.

¹ Tim Keller in a sermon titled “The Rescue”.

² Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 112.

Matured, that is, in the sense of time, in “the fullness of time” (4:4), having reached “the date set by the father” (4:2); not necessarily mature in our wisdom and character just yet. It’s like an 18-year-old getting to leave home, vote, and having rights expanded simply by the sheer fact of enough days and nights passing on the calendar since they took their first breath, whether that 18-year-old is “mature” enough to be responsible with those freedoms or not! “We are sons and daughters come of age, with access to the complete inheritance.”³ This is the metaphor Paul encourages us to use to understand how we are to remain free in faith: heirs through God (4:7)

For all of those immersed under the life, teachings, and work of Jesus Christ, clothed as Christ; we are Christ’s—nothing can pry us from his passion and possession, like a momma bear and her cubs, you don’t want to get between them! We, “Abraham’s offspring,” through faith in Jesus, are neither insiders or outsiders, slaves or nomads, culturally eligible or culturally ineligible, but “sons.” Paul uses this gender-specific term, not to imply a loss of gender or an elevation of one gender over another—we “are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28) after all. Instead, Paul uses the word “son” contextually as the legal term for those persons who can—merely by their natural, unwilled, unforced, uncultivated relation—posses fully and formally the inheritance of the Father.

The problem, even for us children of God, is that often we fail to understand ourselves as heirs **by** Holy Spirit birth (Jn. 3:5), heirs “**through** God” (4:7), heirs **because God made it so** by birthing us, giving us the “the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, [so that we might cry out], ‘Abba! Father!’” (4:6), a phrase of relational intimacy and reverence. When we forget that freedom has been given to us, we attempt to **take** our inheritance, our “true selves, our child-of-God selves” (Jn 1:12, MSG); and claim it as our own.

Eugene Peterson describes the situation this way,

“Freedom is what we receive from God, who himself is free and who wills us to be free. It is not what we rebelliously demand as a right or defend in perpetual paranoia as a possession. It begins in a kind of trusting passivity [as all children’s lives start], not in rebellious assertion. This approach to freedom is thoroughly alien to the literature and rhetoric of the modern and western world which places an inordinately high premium on taking: freedom is something outside ourselves that waits to be grabbed [as every hormonal, unsatisfied, and ready-for-adulthood adolescent knows!]
—through a course in assertiveness training [our culture argues], through breaking out of the bonds of marriage [and any other commitment], through the violence of revolution [we will grab, take our freedom]. The premise behind this approach is that freedom is something that is *there*, which we must take. Paul’s guidance is far different: [he argues] freedom is something that is *here*, which we have only to receive. Paul uses, with great effectiveness, a metaphor to develop the interior dynamics of receiving freedom [how we keep from falling back into slavery]. His metaphor is of a father who has executed a will that decrees that his children live freely. The personal will of the father [1:4] is made explicit in a legal will that names each child (each person!) as an heir.

Implicit in Paul’s position here is that if we are ignorant of the real situation regarding ourselves and Christ, we will fail to live freely.”⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 111.

There are two stories; one Jesus tells and one told of Jesus, that undergird our imagination of being heirs versus being takers, as we “sons” are so prone. The first is familiar to most of us, the story of the prodigal son and his older brother.

The younger son, the prodigal as we call him, takes his inheritance by running off with it in rebellion, squandering it by being distant, out of relational connection with his father and his father’s wisdom. He sees his freedom “*there*,” out somewhere under the authority of only his wits. So he grabs it and runs. The older son also attempts to take his inheritance, but not through living life on his judgment, but by diligent and embittering work, laboring for what would be his one day, squelching all joy of the relationship that was already his. For the older son too, freedom was “*there*,” in the future through his efforts waiting for him to take it as his own. Taking our inheritance by running away from relationship and taking our inheritance by working hard to the detriment of relationship are the most typical ways “Abraham’s offspring” take. Yet, there is one more story that is just as informative to our imagination of taking, one that has helped me wade through the bog of Christian traditions and expectations: the story of the temple tax.

This seldom referenced exchange occurs in Matthew 17:24-27, while Jesus is staying at Peter’s house. Several men from the temple—the place where you go to meet with God, where God forgives sin and makes us free—knock on Peter’s door knowing full well that Jesus is there. These are devout men, “collectors of the two-drachma tax,” as Matthew tells us. Now, this “temple-tax” as it was called by the Jews of the day, was levied not by the governing political authorities or even religious institutions, but by those most genuinely committed to the preservation of the temple for its upkeep and usage beyond what the Levitical tithes provided. Those who genuinely wanted to maintain a right relationship with God and access to God (via the temple) would pay this tax—at least that was the social pressure that surrounded this less-than-freely-offered gift. Peter grew up under the influence of this tax, and perhaps even paid this yearly tax of the equivalent of two-days pay for work, regularly. Now it was time to pay again, and look, the leader of this passionate reinvigoration for righteousness (a.k.a., Jesus) would surely be eager to offer his support by paying the tax too. Right? That’s what the men assume, and so does Peter. After all, this a genuine act of sacrificial commitment to God from the ordinary folk; undoubtedly, a revolutionary against the establishment would appreciate such a gesture. When Peter opens the door, these sincere devotees say to him, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” And Peter being Peter, answers for Jesus, “Why, of course!” Bowing to social pressure, and perhaps even personal conviction, Peter subjects Jesus to a tax, to a payment for the ability to connect with, relate to God.

The younger brother took his inheritance and ran off to use it (and ultimately squander it) by his own wits. The older brother labored hard for a future inheritance missing out what was already his. And Peter attempts to take what is a gift by paying for it, bowing to the social pressure to do this unmandated—remember, the only regulation for this tax was “common law,” community weight—considered genuinely “righteous” thing to connect with God; when God was there in his living room.

Much of what we call “church” and much of what the “church” and its various traditions have required of its people over the centuries have been nothing more than the continuation of “the temple tax.” From the greed of indulgences to the pressure of role calls and monitoring of tithes, much of what people attempt to free themselves from is not a relationship with God, but payment for that relationship. Those “social” regulations required to access God and forgiveness.

To Peter's self-obligating, Jesus responds—per usual—in a most unexpected way, taking Peter aside and saying,

“What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others? The sons are free. However, not to give offense to [these sincere men], go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel [worth four-drachmas]. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.”

Jesus provides for what these men were attempting to take, what Peter was trying to pay for—full life in relationship with God—in a way that can only be acknowledged as a God-gifted action. Peter, if he will pay the temple tax, will do so with faith, trust that what Jesus said was trustworthy and that Jesus would provide all that was needed for access and forgiveness. All Peter can offer is faith; that is all we have to offer as well.

Some of us today are like the younger brother running with our inheritance, not into a relationship, but away from it, trying to live on our own judgments. Some of us today are like the older brother, working bitterly, waiting for the day when we'll get what we think is rightfully ours, missing out what's already ours, not because of our labor but because we are relations of the Father. But most of us, I think, are more like Peter and the sincere “collectors,” submitting to, asking others for, and paying the temple tax naively over and over again. The practices of our faith, for many of us, the acts that demonstrate our genuineness and sincerity, the things we do and do not do because of “social pressure” or personal conviction; are not responses of free children (heirs), but forms of payment for access to what we already have.

The incredible thing is, Jesus, doesn't discard these sincere but unnecessary and even naïve actions by the temple tax collectors or even Peter's immature self-submission to them; but, Jesus does make sure that Peter knows there is a difference between a slave and a son; that nothing is inhibiting his access to the Father except by his own making, and nothing the Father would require from a son. Having made sure Peter knows the truth of his position, he allows Peter to not offend the love of Father by trying to pay for it; he enables Peter to act on faith with humility, gratitude, and responsibility—trusting in Jesus' words and following through with his command.

Only when we approach the practices of our faith from the position as heirs, offering only faith—trusting God is here, sharing his life with us, receiving our inheritance—will remain free in our faith.

We take when we try to live into our inheritance by our wits (life as God-imagers by our own judgment), or to work hard for a future something only to the detriment of what is already ours, or via peer pressure or genuine conviction to pay for that which is gifted. In rebelling, laboring, paying, we are takers. And, by the nature of taking (grabbing, fantasizing, envying, and guilt-tripping), we fight, we fight against peace, peace within ourselves, within our created limitations, among our siblings, and with our Father, perpetuating the divisions that sin fosters.

And so, in trying to take what has been gifted instead of receiving our inheritance with humility, gratitude, and responsibility; we return to the elements—those “fundamental components,” “essential principles,” and

“spiritual beings,”⁵ which Paul says enslave us (4:3, 8-9), even in they are impotent⁶ in their ability to produce life. That is Paul’s warning in chapter four to the Galatians, his Jewish readers, and you and me.

Remember, in chapters two through four; Paul is working through the history of salvation, of humanities enslavement and freedom, a story that in Genesis 1-11 encompasses all of creation before it narrows upon the family of Abraham with the promise to one day widen the scope again to the entire world. In this early all-encompassing part of the story (Genesis 1-11), the human condition is subjected to physical and spiritual death, a separation from the full inheritance as God-imagers in relationship with their Creator. Each of humanity’s attempts to overcome death and bridge the gap between earth and heaven fail. In Genesis 11, just as Abraham is being chosen by God to continue to the story of salvation, the other “peoples” are scattered and subjected to the ‘gods who are no-God’ attempting to take and live out the inheritance of life under the poor leadership of something other than God himself (see Deut. 32:6-9 and Ps. 82).

But here is the good news, “God sent his Son, born of woman (under the physical conditions of humanity, including death), born under the law (under the spiritual conditions of transgressions, of sin and separation from God) to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (4:4). The elemental conditions of our humanity to which we are subjected, the ideas and no-God gods that keep us enslaved have been overcome by Jesus, and thus we are no longer subject to them. Freedom is *here*. That’s Paul’s point. If we are not experiencing the free and light life that Jesus promised, it is because we are still trying to take freedom, to grab it, fantasize about it as something out there, rather than right here.

But, and this is the controversial thing about Paul’s little letter, even in keeping “the law of Moses,” the law which Paul does not condemn but puts in proper perspective, we are returning to the worship of idols! Paul, “a Jew of Jews,” saw “elements of real...irreplaceable worth in thing from which he is revolting. All his life, he continued to love the rock from which he had been hewn.”⁷ Paul is not abounding his appreciation, respect, or his grounding on the traditions of his fathers or the Scriptures before Jesus, but he sees that in our “ignorance and arrogance, we twist them to our demise.” In our genuine and sincere payment of the temple tax (those pressured requirements to be in relationship with God), we are returning to a way of rebellion, not a life of faith.

I’ll ask again, how then do we view the practices of our faith? Are we using them as a means of labor or payment to take what we have already been given? Do we disregard them as constraints, thinking we can live by our own intelligence? Paul warns us here and will explain in greater detail in the forthcoming chapters, that what we *do* in our relationship with God, must be done from the disposition of receiving—faith in our heirship.

Repent and receive is the decided response of the faithful throughout our history. Repent and receive what has been given us, stop taking, and in humility with gratitude and responsibility live into what has been gifted us through Jesus—this is the response of heirship.

Repent, stop taking, and receive with humility, gratitude, and responsibility a gift given, not something labored for in body or mind, paid for with genuineness, or squandered in entitled rebellion, but experienced as personal love. With each breath—the Spirit crying ‘Abba! Father!’, we live as mothers, sons, husbands,

⁵ Douglas Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Evangelical Commentary on the New Testament, 260-261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: an anthology*, XXV.

employees, co-heirs with Christ as “our true selves, our child-of-God selves” (Jn. 1:12). May the gospel message in the Spirit’s birthing not be in vain.

Where are you trying to take your freedom, the God-willed free life, which is the inheritance given to you in Jesus?

Let this question lead us to repent (turn from taking and cling to what we here) and receive with humility, gratitude, and responsibility our full inheritance as daughters and sons of God.

Let’s pray.

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“in regards to God’s will executed in Christ, no one [baptized into Christ] is a slave, no one [having put on Christ] is an unemancipated child. We are sons and daughters come of age, with access to the complete inheritance. Grabbing [for freedom] is out. Fantasizing [about freedom] is out. Receiving is the mode of access to freedom,”⁸ accepting “I am a child of God because of God and living as free (as the psalmist says) as a child content with myself, at play, safe in loving protection, sure in knowing that what will be is because of whose I am; a child of promise.

With this mindset, as heir’s according to promise through God, we receive the means and manner of inheritance, Jesus’ body broken, his blood poured out that we might live free. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

⁸ Peterson, 112.