



In his book *The Prodigal God* Tim Keller uses the following story to illustrate how experiencing God's grace can transform our life: The acclaimed foreign film *Three Seasons* is a series of vignettes about life in postwar Vietnam. One of the stories is about Hai, a cyclo racer and rickshaw driver, and Lan, a beautiful prostitute. Both have deep, unfulfilled desires. Hai is in love with Lan. Lan lives in grinding poverty and longs to live in the beautiful world where she works, but in which she never spends the night. She hopes that the money she makes by prostitution will be her means of escape, but instead the work brutalizes and enslaves her.

Then Hai enters a cyclo race and wins the top prize. With the money he brings Lan to the hotel. He pays for the night and pays her fee. Then, to everyone's shock, he tells her he just wants to watch her fall asleep. Instead of using his power and wealth to have sex with her, he spends it to purchase a place for her for one night in a normal world, to fulfill her desire to belong. Lan finds such grace deeply troubling at first, thinking that Han has done this to control her. When it becomes apparent that he is using his power to serve rather than to use her, it begins to transform her, making it impossible for her to return to a life of prostitution.

In a similar way, as we accept how Christ served and died for us while we were unworthy of his love, we are transformed. It's God's amazing grace working in our hearts. And that is how we are transformed, that is how we no longer want to offer ourselves back to our former ways. So a question is, Why wouldn't we want to offer ourselves to someone who truly shows us selfless love? God's grace to us is not only the most attractive thing we could ever receive, not only does it make us feel totally safe, it is also the only thing that can truly change us. It's grace. It's the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it's Paul's message to the world 2000 years ago that sets us free today.

As we continue our journey through *The Story*, we read in the book of Acts that the church grew rapidly around Jerusalem. In fact, the religious leaders were so jealous of the spiritual power they were witnessing that they began to persecute these early believers. But their persecution didn't end the movement; instead it had the opposite effect. This persecution caused the early Christians to scatter, but they took their message with them. It says as they suffered, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. And many Jews became followers of Christ.

In another dramatic event, Peter received a vision from God that made clear that the good news of Jesus Christ is for the entire world, not just the Jewish world; that God showed no favoritism. Christ died for all people to save all people, and they were all amazed that God's spirit poured out on both the circumcised Jews and the uncircumcised Gentiles.

At about the same time there was this really good Pharisee named Saul who was a persecutor of Jesus followers.

Saul's Conversion

While traveling on a road from Jerusalem to Damascus, carrying these letters calling for the arrest of Damascus Christians, there was suddenly a flash of light from heaven and Saul was knocked off his feet. Then he heard a voice from heaven that said, "I am Jesus, whom you persecuted. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do." Saul had left Jerusalem hating Jesus Christ and despising Christians, but he arrived in Damascus a changed man. Saul was being transformed into an Apostle of Jesus Christ, the Apostle to the Gentiles. He even took a Roman name Paul instead of his Jewish name Saul from there forward.

Although uneasy at first, the early followers of Jesus took Paul under their wings and disciplined him. Then God brought Paul into his calling. For the next 8-10 years Paul made three long and dangerous missionary journeys.

Paul's Missionary Journeys

The results were amazing. Thousands of miles traveled on foot, camel or boat. Thirteen letters written along the way to strengthen the churches he established.

The Apostle Paul goes on his first missionary journey from Antioch and he goes into the southern section of the Roman province called Galatia, which is modern day Southern Turkey. He starts churches in places like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Then he returns home to Antioch.

Council of Jerusalem

After his missionary journey it was at this point in the history of the church that a disagreement broke out. Imagine that, a disagreement in the church! There were certain Jewish followers of Jesus who were teaching that these new Gentile converts needed to observe all the Jewish laws to be true followers of Christ. Remember, these Gentiles had no context for these ceremonial laws. Before coming to Christ, they were pagan and had

likely accepted a wide range of beliefs in their Greek and Roman gods; they were not Jewish.

It was Paul who preached to them the pure gospel—that Jesus died for their sins and God raised him from the dead and you are saved not by religious works, or by eating or not eating certain foods, or by observing certain ceremonies, or by circumcision as a mark of a believer.

All points of view—Jew and Gentile—were discussed at this Jerusalem counsel. Then the Apostle James, the leader of the counsel, spoke up and said, “We should not make it difficult for Gentiles to turn to God.” It was done. Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be followers of Jesus. Their salvation was a gift. They were saved by grace through faith plus nothing else. I think we would have heard especially loud cheering, even sighs of relief from any Gentile men at the council when they learned they didn’t have to go through adult circumcision to become a follower of Christ!

Paul’s second missionary journey takes him back to see those churches in Galatia. It then continues up into Macedonia, which is modern day Greece, to cities with exotic names like Phrygia, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Barea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and back south across the Mediterranean to Caesarea and back up to his home base of Antioch.

Paul’s third journey had an additional purpose to planting churches. The Jerusalem Christians were suffering under persecution and many were in poverty. Paul determined that he could raise funds from the richer Gentile churches to support the poor in Jerusalem. So he goes back to the churches he planted. He spends two years in Ephesus where he wrote a letter to the church in Corinth called 1st Corinthians. Then he goes back up to Macedonia where he writes a second letter to the Corinthians from Philippi. Then he travels down from Macedonia, back to Corinth, stays there for a while and writes his letter to the Church in Rome, back to Philippi again, and then the long trip back to Jerusalem.

As we read in the book of Acts, the church spread rapidly. The message of the Gospel of grace was received. The new converts never looked back, right? Well, in one particular church that Paul planted in the region of Galatia, when Paul left it was as if grace left Galatia too.

While Paul was away there were people who were unwilling to accept the decision of the Jerusalem counsel and they were unwilling to let go of their traditions and wanted to force everyone into their brand of religion. They were unwilling to cling to Christ alone.

So a very interesting phenomena continues to plague the church even today. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone is hard for prideful people. It’s hard for religious people. It’s hard for hard working moral people. The idea that spiritual growth happens

outside the boundaries of religious rules is hard to accept. Our pride, our guilt, our shame compels us to try to earn God’s approval. Doubts enter our minds. Shouldn’t I pay penance for my own sins? Shouldn’t I save myself? Aren’t I supposed to work off the gift so I can one day feel free? Why should I feel free now; I haven’t done anything to earn it? Yet I’m trying to earn it and I don’t feel free. In fact, the more religious I act the more my flesh seems to flare up.

Couldn’t you see these new converts saying to themselves, This grace thing is hard. And you know what? It is. We need to be reminded just as the Galatians were. We need to be reminded today that life is found in a relationship with Jesus, not in keeping religious rules. We need to be reminded that power is not found in taking control and working harder at being righteous, but by surrendering control and yielding more to the Holy Spirit who now lives in you.

Open your Bibles to Galatians 5. Look at Paul’s reaction to his spiritual brothers and sisters turning away from grace.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3).

As we usually see with Paul, he doesn’t pull any punches. He says, “Your foolishness astonishes me.” He says, “Don’t be tempted to make friends with external religious rules. Legalism is an aggressive enemy. It will enslave you. Beware.” Then in Galatians 5:13–26 Paul gives us his Emancipation Proclamation, truths to free us by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, **“You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free”** (John 8:32). The first Paul gives us is a blunt reminder of our calling.

Our Calling

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free (5:13a).

We have been set free from the penalty of sin, the power of Satan, the wrath of God, and from a conscience burdened by guilt, fear, and accusations. Free to come boldly into God’s presence to worship and to pray. And free to serve the Lord and become more like Jesus.

I could see these Galatians saying, “I get it now Paul. We are supposed to live free, and you know what? I am going to enjoy my

freedom and no longer care about what anyone else thinks." Paul anticipates this and tries to head it off at the pass. He goes on to tell us that true Christian freedom involves restraints, restraints that help our spiritual growth and service. Paul explains this in verses 13b–15. This passage tells us that living free isn't easy, it's hard.

Our Necessary Limitations

But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Our Ongoing Problem

License <----- Liberty -----> Legalism

Here is what is happening. Sides formed, arguments ensued. These legalists were rebuked by Paul, but so were those that practiced unrestrained freedom. In fact, what was happening was that those practicing freedom were doing it so "in your face" that it was offending those who were weaker in their faith or still struggling with their own legalism. It wasn't loving. In fact, there were cases where some were actually using their freedom as permission to be unloving, even sin.

In the Corinthian church this flaunting of freedom became so bad that Paul felt compelled to instruct them in 1 Corinthians 10, *"You say you have the right to do anything (anything but sin), but not everything is beneficial, not everything is constructive. Don't seek your own good but seek the good of others."* Our call to be free in Christ and to live by the spirit in love remains constantly under attack from legalism on the right (religious rules and traditions made by man) and license (an in-your-face-insensitivity on the left).

I know for me I'm not loving when I judge the non-essential things in others. I move away from freedom and toward legalism when I "take note" or make a judgment on someone based on what they eat, or how much they eat, or what they wear, or the kind of music they listen to, or the kind of movies they enjoy, or how they use their social media; whatever non-essential I'm not comfortable with.

I'm not loving when I judge their non-essentials. My own freedom, my own joy in Christ is threatened when I focus on non-essentials and then don't love others and show sensitivity to those who don't view these non-essentials the same way I do.

This past weekend I made a trip to Eau Claire, Wisconsin to officiate a wedding for a friend. I landed in Minneapolis on Thursday night right in the middle of a spring blizzard. I forgot how much I don't miss driving at night on slippery country roads with low visibility! I had an alternative reason for going to Wisconsin.

Some of you know that our oldest daughter is engaged to be married to a young man who lives in Eau Claire. Julie and I are coming to grips with the fact that we will have a son-in-law a year from now. We are coming to grips with the fact that our oldest daughter will be living in Wisconsin a year from now.

I have never seen my future son-in-law's house, that place where he is going to take my daughter. I wanted to see where our daughter will be living when I hand her off at the wedding to this guy. You can tell I'm still getting used to the concept.

So I invited myself to stay at my future son-in-law's place to just sort of check things out. He graciously agreed, and we had a great time. I am getting to know him better each time I see him and feeling "kind of" "sort of" better about the whole thing.

My future son-in-law is a gun professional. He sells them, repairs them, collects them, trains others to use them, and is an expert at firing them. Some of you might have a strong reaction to that right now. Being a follower of Christ and a gun enthusiast at the same time may test your concept of freedom in Christ. My Christian liberty allows me to handle and shoot guns.

Some of you may be thinking, One of our pastors at CPC? Shouldn't pastors be praying and not packing? I can shoot guns and not sin. I understand and respect that there are some of us here today that see nothing beneficial and constructive from handling and shooting guns. But I also understand that there are things that you may do that are not sinful but I would see nothing good coming from it.

As Christians we are called to celebrate our freedom but with responsibility. My son-in-law gave me a lesson on gun safety, on how to safely grip and shoot, and perform safety checks. He gave me ear protection. He pointed me in the right direction. I am responsibly exercising my freedom in Christ.

So how do we live free? How do we not fall back to our flesh driven ways? How do we experience real life change to be more like Christ? Paul assures us in these final verses that it happens when we let the Holy Spirit help us. He is saying, "Foolish Galatians, you forgot the Holy Spirit!"

Our Continuous Conflict

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (verses 16-18).

Then he reminds us, as if he really needs to, descriptions of the powers warring within us.

The Flesh

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and

witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like... I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (verses 19–21b).

Paul is telling us “look how far Christians can fall when they serve the flesh rather than the Spirit.” At first glance one might conclude that Christians can lose their salvation. It doesn’t mean that at all. The verb tense for “live like this” or literally “practice” is present, indicating that a “habitual continuation in fleshly sins is a lack of evidence of spiritual life.” But for us, when we lapse into these we need to know how to surrender to the Spirit’s control.

In Conflict with the Spirit

In contrast to the flesh, Paul lists something he calls fruit of the Spirit. The presence of this fruit indicates the presence of the Spirit in our lives. When we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, he produces spiritual fruit, like a ripe cluster of grapes. This cluster has nine virtues that brighten lives and are evidence of a transforming life. About fruit—we don’t produce it by our own effort. Fruit is simply there. It is produced through a complex and mysterious process.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (verses 22–23).

Paul describes our calling, he describes our flesh/spirit conflict, he describes the life change in terms of spiritual fruit, and now he gives us the answer to the question, What can we do to overcome this raging war in us between flesh and spirit? Now Paul describes how the Gospel, not religion, sets us free.

Our Walk of Freedom

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (v. 24).

The language indicates that our sinful nature is at present, right now, dying. Not dead, dying. It has been nailed to the cross, so it doesn’t have the power over us it once enjoyed, yet it can still influence us if we feed it. John Stott tells us, “Too often we keep wistfully returning to the scene of its execution. We begin to fondle it, to caress it to long for its release. We even try to take

it down again from the cross. We need to learn to leave it there. When some jealous, some lustful, some proud, some raging, some envying thought invades our mind we must kick it out at once. We have declared war on it; we are not going to resume negotiations...”

That moment we accepted Christ our flesh went to the cross with Christ. We have crucified the flesh. So now...

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (verses 24–25).

Just as the Holy Spirit led Christ during his temptations, so the Spirit will guide us through the battle with our flesh. We must choose this every day. We must choose this every morning. We must focus our minds on what Paul says in Philippians 4:8, *“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”*

Believing the gospel was actually pretty easy for me 35 years ago. Living free is hard. It wasn’t until I understood that the gospel still applies to me every day that I recognized what it meant to walk by the Spirit and be free. I have learned that I cannot continuously say no to this or to that, unless there is something so much more attractive to choose. Saying no to my selfishness, my envy, my lust, my ego takes an enormous amount of energy. I have battle scars from my battles with the flesh. The only hope I have found is to say yes to the most attractive and powerful things I know, to say yes to something to which I can devote my energies to.

The thing I can say yes to is this: Every day and every morning I can remember the fact that I am loved. Every day and every morning I can remember the fact that in my total brokenness I am still loved. That revelation has set me free from the compulsion to say yes to the flesh and instead to say yes to the spirit. Of course I still fall. But not as much and not as far as I used to. Thanks be to God and his amazing grace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1404–29FC