

For the past seven years in New York City I've been walking my daughter to school almost every morning when I am not travelling. I've really enjoyed it most of the time.

For the first few years our walk to school only took about 5 minutes and Elana would hold my hand most of the way. Sometimes she'd sing a song and some days she had a skip in her step.

For the next few years after that, our walk was longer. It usually took about 15 minutes. Sometimes she would hold my hand but increasingly she started showing more independence. Occasionally she would tell me what was going on with friends but many days she preferred to walk in silence.

When she started middle school last year, our trips to school got quite a bit longer. It now involves a 15 minute walk, a 20 minute subway ride and a 5 minute walk. We have to leave earlier, too, which means that we're both more tired and more inclined to walk in silence. And, she's getting older and becoming more responsible so an inevitable moment of transition grew closer.

Two weeks ago she started taking the subway to and from school on her own! She's a big girl now – for an 11 year old 7<sup>th</sup> grader anyway. It's amazing how much freedom this has introduced to our whole family. Of course, Elana feels a whole new level of freedom and responsibility. That's great. I have significantly reduced my morning commute time, now instead of taking the subway with her, I take a short walk through Central Park to see her off on the subway. I get to take the dog with me and he also experiences a new freedom. Before 9:00 am dogs get to run freely off leash in Central Park so he's loving this new development. It makes life easier for Rhesa, especially when I'm out of town and she previously had to take Elana and pick her up. And it's better for Braden because there's always someone at home to see him off to school as well. It was often the case before that he left for school from an empty apartment.

Now, I'd be lying if I said that I don't sometimes miss those days when I would hold my little girl's hand and listen to her sing a made up song along the short walk to school. But, now that we've made this transition and EVERYONE has experienced more freedom – Elana, me, Rhesa, Braden and even our little dog, Jack – no one really wants to go back to the way it used to be.

Once you experience freedom, you don't want to go back.

Remember when you got your driver's license and the keys to your first car?  
Remember when you finally moved out of your parent's house into your first apartment? Did you want to go back?

Once you experience freedom, you don't want to go back... BUT, some of us have a hard time with freedom because it feels less safe. Some days it's hard to watch an 11

year old walk down the subway steps on her own. It would feel safer to go with her. It would feel safer to go back to the way it was before we had so much freedom.

This is essentially the issue the Apostle Paul is addressing in the Bible passage we're going to look at today.

Jesus was a Jewish man and almost all of the earliest followers of Jesus were Jewish, too. Jesus had a unique relationship with the Hebrew Scriptures. On one hand, they established the foundation for everything he taught. He referred to them in an authoritative way. But he also made it clear that he came to complete the law, to fulfill it. So while what we now know as the Old Testament law is relevant as a foundation for so much of our Christian faith, as Christians we are not bound by the law as the people of Israel were before Jesus arrived.

Before Jesus, one's relationship with God was defined by faithfulness to God expressed through adherence to God's law. But Jesus came to bring freedom! He fulfilled the law by living a sinless life and offered us his righteousness by giving his life for us on the cross. Our relationship with God is no longer defined by adhering to a set of rules or laws. Our relationship with God is now defined by the faith expressing itself through love for God and love for others. It is a tremendous gift of freedom.

BUT, some times some people have a hard time with freedom because it doesn't feel very safe and they'd rather go back to the way things used to be. Even though Christ came to set us free by making us right with God NOT on the basis of what we do but on the basis of what He did for us... sometimes it's tempting to want to make it about rule-following instead because at least we can then measure how we're doing in comparison to others. And that's what was happening in the church in Galatia in the first century. And it made the Apostle Paul furious. Listen...

***5:1** It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

***2** Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. **3** Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. **4** You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. **5** For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. **6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

***7** You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? **8** That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. **9** "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." **10** I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. **11** Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has*

*been abolished. 12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*

I want to identify three main distinctions or directives from our passage today and this is the first one...

1. Don't distort the gospel by turning it into a religion about rules.

Every religion in the world is about following a set of rules to earn favor with a Supreme Being or Higher Power. The gospel, the good news, of Christ is that we are set free by the sacrifice in Christ and faith in Him - NOT by what we do.

My friend, Watson Jones, is planting a church with Orchard Group in inner city Philadelphia. The area he is in has a lot of African-Americans who have converted to some form of Islam. For some of them, it is an intense religious practice, for others it is more about the cultural identification. When Watson wants to share the gospel of Christ with the Muslims in his neighborhood, he often begins by asking them, "On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate yourself on how well you're following the Koran?" Watson says most of the time a guy will give himself a 7 or an 8. And Watson says, "Well then you know Allah is angry with you, right?" And he goes on to explain that if getting right with God/Allah, requires perfection, we're never going to live up. And then Watson goes on to tell them about the good news that through Jesus God has made us right with him by what he has done, not by our attempts to live in perfect adherence to the law.

That's what Paul is saying to the people in Galatia, you have been given freedom in Christ. Don't go back to the burden of the law. Don't make Christianity into a religion about following the rules!

-----

When Paul refers to circumcision here, it acts as a symbol of the law. The Hebrew law required circumcision for all male infants.

But here's the problem. Some people in the first century were teaching that in order to become a Christian, you had to be circumcised – whether you were an infant or an adult!

This presents two problems – the first we've already talked about. By making Christianity about following a set of rules, like, you must be circumcised; you're setting yourself up for failure. No one can keep the whole law perfectly.

And, this is the second part, by forcing new converts who want to become Christians to be first be circumcised is to attach specific culturally bound practices as part of the gospel. This leads to the second major directive in this passage...

2. Don't distort the gospel by making it culturally bound.

Circumcision was a Jewish practice. It was not practiced among the other nations or people groups. So asking new believers to be circumcised as part of their initiation to the Christian faith was imposing a specific cultural practice to the gospel which is intended to be universal. It would be a little bit like me going to another country to share the gospel and teaching people that if they wanted to become Christians they should start by saying the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag every morning - or something like that.

This was actually a source of great debate in the early church, so much so that the first major council of the church occurred in Jerusalem around this topic. We read about it in Acts 15...

**15:1** *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* **2** *This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.* **3** *The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.* **4** *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.* **5** *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."* **6** *The apostles and elders met to consider this question.* **7** *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.* **8** *God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.* **9** *He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.* **10** *Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?* **11** *No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."* **13** *When they finished, James spoke up...* **19** *"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.* **20** *Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.* **21** *For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."*

Basically what the church leaders decided is that it doesn't make sense to ask new believers to adopt our cultural practices. That would distort the gospel and could potentially be offensive to them (especially when it involves cutting off even small pieces of sensitive body parts!). At the same time, we should probably ask them

from cultural practices they have which would be offensive to us – like eating meat sacrificed to idols or from strangled animals.

In other words, we are not governed by the Law of the Hebrew Scriptures or even by the culturally bound practices. We are governed by a law of love for one another. And our practices should not make it more difficult for someone to become a follower of Jesus.

In the last month Orchard Group has seen new churches launch in the Harlem neighborhood in New York City and in the neighborhood around the United Center in Chicago. Both churches are led by African-American lead planters and are located in historic African-American communities. There are some subtle and not so subtle differences in worship style and music and communication style from the way things are done here at Harbor of Hope, as you might guess! This is one of the great things about the gospel. It is not culturally bound! It's not about a particular style of music or clothing. It is not confined by national boundaries or human languages. It is not exclusive to one country or continent. It can not be captured by one race or tribe or nation. It is for all people for all times. Which is why Paul says, if you want to distort this beautiful thing by expecting other people to practice your specific cultural practices, like circumcision, I wish you'd just cut the whole thing off!

Compare Acts 16 – Paul tells Timothy to be circumcised!!

**Acts 16:1-3**

*Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.*

3. Don't distort the gospel by making it a license to do whatever you choose.

*5:13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh[a]; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." [b] 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*