

“Tired of People Pleasing?”

Galatians 2:11-14, 19-21

*Series: Be Free Week 2. Freedom from Pleasing People*

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Good morning Woodside! For those of you I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting, my name is Linda Marr and I'm Director of Growth here at Woodside and a member of our Sermon Team. If you are new to Woodside – welcome! We are happy you chose to worship here with us.

A reading from the book of Galatians, Chapter 2: But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, “Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions.”

For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I may live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die. Galatians 2: 11-14, 19-21 NLT.

Today we continue our Be Free Sermon Series. As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our country, we're exploring the revolutionary message of Jesus captured in Galatians. We'll see how the radical promise of Jesus Christ transforms the very earliest Christians. And we'll discover how we can be free where it counts most – on the inside.

Last Sunday we looked at Freedom from Control. Today we're talking about freedom from a specific type of control -- People Pleasing. Anyone out there a people pleaser? Like to make people happy? Try to make EVERYONE happy?

Guilty as charged, I am a people pleaser from way back.

One of the deepest questions we carry is this, “Are you pleased with me?” “What do I have to do to make you happy?”

At the heart of pleasing people is a question many of us never outgrow – “Am I enough?” We can spend years trying to answer that question.

When I was growing up my family went to Bustleton United Methodist Church every Sunday, taking our place with my dad's parents in the hallowed Brecht pew – heaven help any visitor who mistakenly sat in our pew! Very welcoming, right?

At an early age, my grandmother made it clear that my sister and I were expected to sit quietly in church like “good girls”—no wiggling, no whispering, and certainly no laughing. I'm not sure what grandmother Florence would think of our joyful Woodside worship services! When we met her expectations, she would quietly pass us peppermint Life Savers—not the noisy kind in wrappers, but the roll kind you could slip out without a sound. I performed beautifully for those life savers, again and again.

I came to understand that my grandmother's approval was tied to appearances and “looking good.” Looking back, I learned something bigger than church behavior. I learned that approval felt good. I liked being known as one of those “good Brecht girls.” And once you learn that lesson, it can follow you for a very long time.

As I got older, I learned how to act in school to make teachers happy, what to say and how to dress to make the cool kids –ok, somewhat cool kids – like me. It wasn't so much about learning or making real friends, it was about being liked/accepted.

People pleasing followed me into adulthood. I got to work before my boss and stayed after she left, wanting her to see how dedicated I was. When I had kids, I was fortunate to cut back to working part-time. But then I made myself available nearly 24/7 because I was worried my co-workers would think I was a slacker. I needed them to see that I could still do it all.

At the same time, I was trying to be a “good mom,” volunteering for class parties when no one else would, doing more than my share of carpooling because I had flexibility, leading church choir with my toddler on my hip because “good girls” never turn down the minister. On the outside I may have looked successful, on the inside I was often exhausted.

Because people pleasing never stays small. It grows until other people's opinions begin to control us. We've been so well trained to please people, it's hard to stop. A wise person once said, “You wouldn't worry about what people think of you if you realized how little they do.”

But we still worry. And we work harder – wanting to do something, to control, impact what others think of us. If we work harder, longer, wear this, say that, THEN they will see what a good person we are and like us.

Friends, people pleasing is exhausting because it asks us to carry a burden God never meant us to have. The moment someone else's approval becomes necessary for our peace, we've surrendered the freedom that God has already given us through Jesus.

Why do we turn to others instead of resting in the freedom of God? Why do we get so caught up in seeking approval from others that we can't possibly believe God could simply love us? Thinking we need to work to earn God's love, to clean ourselves up so God accepts us.

The key mistaken belief here is work. God is already pleased with us. Before we've taken our first breath, God is pleased with his perfect creation. God's acceptance and love do not depend on our efforts but on his grace. There is nothing we can do or say to make him love us more or love us less.

If you're sitting there thinking people pleasing is a small problem, consider this: it nearly divided the early church. And the person at the center of it was my favorite disciple, the apostle Peter.

If anyone should have known better, it was Peter. He had walked on water; he had seen the risen Christ. Peter had even been shown by God in a vision that Gentiles were fully welcomed into God's family. Yet even Peter fell into the trap of fearing people. Peter knew the truth. He simply didn't want certain people – “the ultra-religious” - to be unhappy with him. Peter wasn't afraid of being wrong. Peter was afraid of disapproval, of not being liked. And this led to a showdown with his friend and fellow apostle Paul.

Before his life changing encounter with Jesus, Paul thought the best way to please God was to go after, to persecute unbelievers. How can we ever think that hurting others could possibly make God happy? On the road to Damascus Jesus showed Paul just how wrong he was.

Paul realizes the trap of people pleasing when he confronts the churches of Galatia about believing a false gospel. Telling people they are flat out wrong is not an easy or popular message. But Paul knows who he is and stands firm in God. “Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant.” Galatians 1:10.

Peter and Paul are both Jews who were saved by Jesus and are now leaders in the new church. They are visiting and teaching the new gentile Christians in Antioch. They eat and fellowship with the gentiles who the church agreed did not have to first become Jewish by following the Jewish laws before they were accepted as Christians.

One evening as they are enjoying a lovely meal together, along comes a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem – the ultra-religious type. They are aghast at the Jews and Christians sitting and eating together, which Jewish law strictly prohibits.

Peter falls right into that people pleasing trap – he jumps up and starts to leave the table, igniting an unholy chain reaction. Other Jewish Christians follow his lead – even Barnabas, Paul's close friend and preacher to the Gentiles.

Imagine sitting at that table. One moment you are sharing a lovely meal with your new brothers and sisters in Christ, excitedly talking about Jesus and your new faith. Strangers enter the room and Peter and many of those same brothers and sisters suddenly jump up to distance themselves from you, all while avoiding your eyes. The message is clear: “We can't be seen with you; you're not really one of us. You aren't clean.”

What will Paul do? Fall in line with Peter to please his fellow Jewish Christians? Those strangers are his people – Paul is a Jew of the highest pedigree. Paul stands. Faces turn. The room grows quiet.

Paul confronts Peter. “Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?” Galatians 2:14.

Peter did not stop believing the gospel, he stopped living like he believed it when other peoples' opinions entered the room. Paul confronts Peter because grace – the incredible gift of Jesus dying on the cross -- was at stake.

Paul says, “For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I might live for God.” Galatians 2:19.

Over the years the Jewish leader had taken God's holy law and added so many additional requirements that it was impossible to keep and greatly distorted God's original and good law. The Israelites got so caught up in running around trying to “keep the law” to be “right” with the religious leaders, they forgot about living in step with its author – God.

God sent Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins so that we would be reconciled to him once and for all. And he made his love available to all – which no person had a right to add conditions to. All are invited and accepted at his table of grace.

Then Paul gives one of the most powerful statements in all of scripture. “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.” Galatians 2: 20 – 21.

Paul realized something Peter forgot: If Christ lives in me, whose opinion matters most? If Jesus already gave his life for me, what more approval am I searching for?

Jesus gave his life so we could be free. Think about those words for a moment. Jesus gave his LIFE so we could be free. Why do we still let ourselves be enslaved to people pleasing? How can we break free?

Stop Feeding the problem. Social media is one modern expression of an age-old problem. We scroll for approval, comparison, and ultimately validation. Can't make a move, decision without looking to social media for the “best way” to fit in, be liked. What should I wear, how should I act? What are others doing? Technology isn't the problem, our need for approval is. Stop scrolling; instead look up. Talk with your heavenly father who loves you unconditionally.

Stop giving away power. Last week Pastor Doug spoke about how fear of losing control can turn goals into gods. Fear can also turn pleasing others into gods. We're afraid of what others will think of us, so we strive harder and harder to please them, to fit in. And soon those people become idols – we need their approval, their acceptance, their likes. No person should have that much power over us.

Love. Stop pleasing and start loving. Love people. Not focusing on pleasing others but loving others. When we're people pleasing, we're trying to get something from people. When we're loving others, we're trying to give something to people.

I've started going on God walks at night. I head out with Koda after dinner and talk with God. I tell him my prayers, my fears, my worries, and ask for his wisdom. Talking aloud keeps my

mind from wandering. These walks are quieting my need for other voices and help me feel God's love.

Brennan Manning was an American theologian and Franciscan priest who knew the horrors of war. He shares this story of how he received his name "Brennan." His best friend growing up was named Ray. They did everything together: went to the same school, bought a car together, even double-dated. They enlisted in the Army together, suffered through boot camp and fought on the frontlines of the Korean War.

One night, hunkered down in a foxhole, Brennan and Ray were eating chocolate bars and talking about the old times back in Brooklyn. Their memories were interrupted when a live grenade landed in their trench. Ray smiled at Brennan, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, yet sparing Brennan.

Years later, when Brennan felt called to become a priest, he was told to take a saint's name. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So Richard Francis Xavier Manning became Father Brennan Manning. He took the identity of his savior in the trench.

A few years later, he visited Ray's mother in Brooklyn. Sitting at the table one night, Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up from her seat, shook her finger in Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?"

Brennan said at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the Cross of Jesus wondering, "Does the Son of God really love me?" and Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"

In our youth room there is a mirror that says, "This is the face of someone Jesus loves."

Every morning, we have a choice.

We can spend our day asking, "What do people think of me?"

Or we can begin with a better question:

"What does God say about me?"

And in Christ, God's answer is already settled.

In Christ you don't have to prove yourself.

In Christ you don't have to perform for approval.

In Christ you don't have to earn a place at the table.

You are loved.

You are accepted.

You are welcome.

Amen.