

“Put Down the Remote Control”

Galatians 1:11-24

Series: The Key to Be Free Week 1. Free from Control

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The Woodside Church

June 6, 2021

Pastor Wayne McKay has led worship services in a local nursing home for the last 25 years. One regular who shows up, we'll call her Edith, has a television remote control attached to the arm of her wheelchair. Pastor McKay says, “When my attempts at humor fall flat Edith aims the remote control at me and threatens to turn me off.” Once when she pointed the remote at the pastor he said, “Edith, you can't turn me off.” She smiled and replied, “I'm not trying to turn you off. I'm trying to switch the channel to Joel Osteen.”¹ Now that our services are livestreamed, I hope you won't turn me off.

How many remote controls do you have in your house? I counted seven for our entertainment center. Now you can also use an app on your phone to control your lights, garage door, thermostat, appliances and car. I don't even know what half the buttons on my Universal remote do. For all I know I could be controlling some alternate Universe.

I remember when they first gave me a remote control to use in my sermons. No more relying on people in the booth who changed the slides too fast or too slow. Now I have the power in my hands! I am the master. I am in complete control. What happened? The first time I tried it I messed up the slides, I jumped ahead too fast and I hit the laser pointer button and blinded the front row. The remote control gives you power. You can make things disappear, mute them, freeze them, replay a great play, fast forward through the dull stuff and skip the commercials.

What if you had a universal remote control that controlled your universe? What if you could fast forward through the dull parts of school or work, make your vacation go slower, stop time to get your to do list done, skip arguments with a family member, mute annoying people, delete embarrassing moments, play continuous golf or video games?

In the movie *Click*. Adam Sandler plays Michael Newman, a workaholic architect with no time for his wife and children. He keeps promising to go camping with them, to finish the tree fort in the backyard. At the same time, his demanding boss tells him to work more if he wants to be a partner. Stressed and stretched to the max, Michael meets an oddball salesclerk named Morty who gives him a magical remote that allows him to bypass life's troubles with a click. He can skip the argument with his wife, fast forward through the boring meals with his parents or the cold in his head, freeze the irritating kid next door, and still get all his work done. At first it's the greatest gift in the world. But then the remote control gradually takes over and begins to program him. His life races faster and faster. He misses all the touching moments and family memories. He discovers that throughout his life he's been remote and he never had control.

¹ Wayne McKay, Lubbock, Tex. Christian Reader, "Lite Fare."

So often we are caught in the relentless see-saw between taking control and being controlled. As you grow, you are supposed to take more control over your life. It begins with getting control of your body and its functions, gaining control of knowledge and skills through education, taking control of your future by earning a living, buying shelter and transportation, saving for college and retirement. There are also people in our lives who control us. At first, we need this. We depend on our parents to nurture and protect us, our teachers to instruct us, our companies to employ us. We accept a certain level of control. Yet what happens when a parent won't let go of control, a supervisor micromanages everything you do, the government or economy puts pressure on you, an illness knocks you down, a spouse is constantly critical or even abusive? What happens when Covid blows everything up? Control feels stifling, oppressive, even dangerous.

At the same time, though we don't like to admit it, we can be controlling. We say "I don't mean to be controlling. After all, I'm only giving you this advice for your own good. I know what's best for you. Everything will work perfectly if you only listen to me and follow my directions. You messed that up, let me show you how to do it right. What do you mean you don't agree with my views? Here are all the reasons you should think my way. If you really love me, you will do what I say."

Ever said any of those? Ever thought any of those? Ever done them? Let's face it: we are all stuck on the see-saw of trying to control and being controlled. Do you want to get off? Do you want to put down the remote control?

Today we begin a new sermon series called, "The Key to Be Free." For the next six Sundays we will look at one of the most passionate letters of the New Testament: the book of Galatians. It may be the earliest book of the New Testament – written even before the Gospels. As you read and study it, you will see how the raw power, the revolutionary message, the radical promise of Jesus Christ impacted and transformed the very earliest believers. It's a story of salvation, grace and, most of all, freedom. Galatians is the letter of freedom. Over the next weeks we'll discover the Key to Be Free where it counts most: on the inside. We'll learn how to be free from the forces that imprison us and control us. And we will learn from the perfect teacher – a man who was perhaps the most hyper, type A, number #1 controller of all time – the Apostle Paul.

He was born Saul in a town called Tarsus which, today, is in the country of Turkey. Saul was Jewish, but his family lived outside the Holy Land. Now some Jews mixed with the local culture and didn't follow all the Law. Not Saul. He was very proud of his Jewish heritage and he boasted about being a better Jew than all the rest. In the letter to the Philippians he actually gives his resume (Philippians 3:4-6)

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

- **Circumcised on the eighth day** – the first requirement for all Jewish males
- **Of the people of Israel** – not a convert to Judaism
- **Of the tribe of Benjamin** – Saul even knew his lineage back to the Patriarch Jacob

- **A Hebrew of Hebrews** – They spoke Hebrew not Greek in their home and observed all the kosher laws
- **In regard to the law, a Pharisee** — This was the most religious, law abiding form of Judaism. The word “Pharisee” means separate. Pharisees tended to separate themselves from Gentiles and other less observant Jews. But being a Pharisee was not enough for Saul. His family sent him to Jerusalem to be educated by the greatest Rabbi of the day Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Saul went farther. He was such a Type A, Law-aholic, a super Controller, he felt it was his sworn duty to stop all Jewish heretics who were breaking the Law and perverting God’s Truth.
- **As for zeal, persecuting the church;** He chased down, arrested and imprisoned the followers of that heretical false prophet named Jesus. He persecuted them to the point of death. He writes to the Galatians

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. (Galatians 1:13-14).

Listen to those words – intense, persecuted, advancing beyond many others, extremely zealous – these give you a feel for Saul’s character. And one more thing

- **As for legalistic righteousness, faultless** - We all say, “I’m not perfect. Nobody’s perfect.” Saul said, “You never met me. As far as God’s concerned, I am perfect.” There you have it. He was the most competitive, condemning, conceited, controlling person you could meet. He was the worst kind of controlling person – the religious kind. He believed God demanded him to persecute these Christians and God was pleased with what he was doing.

But Saul was wrong. One day, while going to Damascus to catch some Christians, he ran into Christ. He tells the Galatians

God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16).

In that moment everything turned inside out and upside down for Saul. The Christ he was persecuting for God turned out to be God. The Law he so zealously kept was replaced by the free gift of Grace. The Gentiles whom he loathed, despised and avoided became the people he loved for the rest of his life. And the God he thought was condemning and controlling like him turned out to be pleased with him – not because of what he did but in spite of what he did. Saul, who later took the name Paul, was set free from the control of the Law and from trying to control others to follow the Law.

He writes the letter to the Galatians, a group of churches he planted in south central Turkey, because after Paul leaves, a group of missionaries arrive and try to force

these Christians to follow the Law. They attempt to take control over these young, new believers. Having been freed from that control himself, Paul could not bear to see anyone forced back into that prison again.

Why do we try to control the people and circumstances in our lives? It's quite simple. Fear. I am afraid my kids will misbehave or rebel. I am afraid of how my spouse will act or act out. I am afraid I won't reach that next rung on the ladder at work or I may lose my job. I want everyone to get along. I want everything to go my way. Now you may say, "Some of these are goals – for school, work, family, life. Goals are good." Yes. But fear turns goals into gods. We start to worship our goals, obey our goals, we can't let go of our goals, we must have our goals at all costs even if it means sacrificing what is precious and dear to us. A controlling person will say they are working for the family and that's why they have no time for the family. A controlling person drives away the family and friends they think they are helping, the ones they are actually smothering. We push remote control buttons and desperately try to get everyone to do what we want.

And why don't they obey our goals? They are trying to control things as well. Now when they don't submit to our control, we have a few options. We can get mad, we can get tough, we can get even. That's what Saul did before He met Jesus. He forced these Jews to give up Jesus and follow the Law. How did he break free from the see saw of control and being controlled? How did he put down the remote control?

One word: Grace. Paul starts this letter, as he would later start all his letters with:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Galatians 1:3-5

There is only one person who has the right to control us and the power to control us: God. But God is gracious. Instead of demanding us to obey His Laws, God gave us His Son. Instead of punishing us for breaking His Laws, God lets the punishment for our sins fall on Jesus. Instead of giving up on us and letting us suffer in this present evil age we've made, He reaches down and rescues us. Grace is heaven when you've earned hell, pardon when you deserve punishment, freedom from the prison of control.

That Grace got a hold of Paul. Once that Grace gets a hold of you, you start to release your hold on your goal. You still have goals, you just hold them lightly. Instead of worshipping them, you're willing to let them go. You stop trying to run the show. You stop attempting to manage everyone's life. It doesn't bother you when circumstances don't go your way. You don't feel the need to correct or convince people you're right. You allow people to have their own opinions and decisions. You are not so exhausted because you don't have to work so hard to make things go your way. You start to feel more at peace with the world. That Grace inside you has another wonderful byproduct – it creates a Teflon coating over your heart that causes other people's control to slide off you. And fear? It starts to disappear. It doesn't happen all at once. You have to grow in Grace and practice being gracious. Join us on Sunday over these next weeks and find out

how Grace is the key to be free. Listen to this man tell how Grace set him free and the impact it made on his little daughter.

How can I tell you the difference God has made in my life? All my daughter Allison had known for the first five years of her life was a dad who was profane and angry. I remember I came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger with life. I am ashamed to think of the times Allison hid in her room to get away from me.

Five months after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, that little girl went to my wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." At age 5! What was she saying? She'd never studied the archeological evidence for the Bible. All she knew was her dad used to be this way: hard to live with. But more and more her dad is becoming a man of peace. And if that is what God does to people, then sign her up. At age 5 she gave her life to Jesus.

God changed my family. He changed my world. He changed my eternity.²

That was Lee Strobel, the Chicago journalist and former atheist who wrote "The Case for Christ." Lee Strobel learned how to put down the remote control. How about you?

² Lee Strobel, author and teaching pastor at Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California, from sermon "The Case for Christ"