

Love that Delivers

The Gospel – the Greatest Love

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Bible Text: Galatians 2:13-21

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If I asked you today to tell us the first thought that comes to mind when I mention the words "Christmas time" and a person carrying a sack, now how would you answer? The words "Christmas time" and a person carrying a sack? Well, most of us, I suppose, would think of this guy, huh? Santa Claus and there is certainly nothing wrong with that but actually that's not the person I'm thinking of this morning, instead it was him. Do you know who that is? That's an artist's rendering of the character named Christian or Pilgrim from John Bunyan's famous allegory called "The Pilgrim's Progress." Now, just for clarity, we're not talking about Paul Bunyan. Okay, that's a different Bunyan, alright? I actually made that mistake in seminary once and barely survived the ridicule. We're not talking about Paul, we're talking about John, okay? That guy, John Bunyan. John Bunyan was a pastor and writer in England in the 1600s. He was imprisoned multiple times because he held religious services outside the auspices of the established Church of England so he wrote. During his first imprisonment, he wrote "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners." You get a bit about his theology from that particular title. Then later he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress," which since the date of its publication in 1678 has never gone out of print. Many would still regard it as one of the most significant works in English literature demonstrated in part by the fact that it has now been translated in over 200 different languages. There are also, you may know, children's versions of "The Pilgrim's Progress," and if you have never done so and if it's appropriate for your children given their age, I would encourage you to consider reading through "The Pilgrim's Progress" with them because of all the great biblical and spiritual teaching that it contains.

The story features a man named Christian or Pilgrim, who is on a journey from his home town, the city of Destruction to the celestial city atop Mount Zion. If you've read that book, you know that along the way, he meets all sorts of characters like Obstinate and Pliable and the Worldly Wiseman, to name a few. He goes to all sorts of amazing places like the Slough of Despond, to the Wicket Gate, through Vanity Fair. Bunyan's imagination was incredible. By far the most consistent picture of Christian or Pilgrim, especially early in the book, is his struggle with his sack of sin, this bag of guilt. Early on, Pilgrim meets a man named Evangelist who points him toward the Wicket Gate and the light where he can have this burden removed but then on his way, he encounters a man named World. Listen carefully to Trey and Deb now as they portray the next lines in this famous portion of "The Pilgrim's Progress."

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: Hello there, my good fellow, and where are you traveling with such a heavy burden?

CHRISTIAN: Oh yes, it certainly is a burdened manner and as good a one as any poor creature ever had. As to where I'm going, madam, let me tell you. I am on my way toward that distant, Wicket Gate that is just ahead for there, I have been told, I will gain entrance into the way that will lead to the removal of my heavy burden.

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: Do you have a wife and children?

CHRISTIAN: Yes, but I am so weighed down with this burden that I cannot enjoy them as much as was formerly the case. In fact, it now seems as if I had no family at all.

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: Then will you listen to me if I give you good advice?

CHRISTIAN: Certainly I will, provided it is good, for I am in great need of wise counsel.

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: Then I would advise you to get rid of your burden with all possible speed; for you will never have peace of mind until then.

CHRISTIAN: What you describe is certainly what I am seeking after, namely to be rid of my burden. But I cannot get relief by myself, nor do I know of a man in our country who can remove it from my shoulders. So for this reason I am heading in this direction, as I told you, so that I may be rid of my burden.

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: Who directed you to go this way so as to be rid of your burden?

CHRISTIAN: A man who appeared to me to be a very great and honorable person; his name, as I remember it, is Evangelist.

WORLDLY-WISEMAN: I most certainly condemn him for his advice, for there is not a more dangerous and troublesome way ahead in all the world than that into which he has directed you; and you will prove this to be so if you submit to his guidance. Indeed, you appear to have experienced some of this trouble already, for I notice on you signs that surely come from a state of depression.

Yet those signs are but the beginning of your sorrows, even as other pilgrims experience along the same way. Listen to me, since I have more experience than you! As you proceed along the way ahead, you are likely to experience wearisomeness, painfulness, hunger, perils, nakedness, sword, lions, dragons, darkness, and in a word, death, and what else? These things are certainly true since they have been confirmed by the testimonies of many pilgrims. So why should a man so carelessly place himself in danger by paying attention to the advice of a stranger?

CHRISTIAN: Why, madam, this burden on my back is more terrible to me than all of those things that you have mentioned. No, to give careful thought, I don't care what I meet with in the way as long as I can eventually be delivered from my burden.

I hope you weren't distracted by the fact that Trey and Deb are married, right? You didn't pick up any bad habits there like Deb when she said, "Listen to me for I am more experienced than you." Just get that out of your minds. That's not the point of this illustration. But the issue that this man is raising is timeless, right? How can I be delivered from this burden? It was possibly the oldest book in the Bible, the book of Job, his friend Bildad poses the exact same question, "How then can a man be just with God and how can he be clean who is born of a woman?" So we all know what it's like to be weighed down with a sack of sin and a sack of guilt and a sack of despair and the way to have that sack removed is a central element in the story of Christmas.

With that in mind, please open your Bible now to Galatians 2. That's on page 147 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. This Christmas season, we're studying the Gospel, the greatest love story ever told and we thought that would be a logical way to conclude the theme we've been pursuing all year long of loving our neighbors because what empowers us, what motivates us to try to love others better is growing in our understanding and appreciation for the way God loved us. That's the foundation on which we would seek to love anybody else in our life. Well, make no mistake about this: if somebody can help us remove this sack at Christmas time, that would be a grand demonstration of love for sure which is why we've been looking at some of the great passages in the word of God that talk about Christ's love for us. Now we're going to talk about Galatians 2 and we're driving toward the well-known Galatians 2:20. I think part of the challenge in our interpretation and application of that verse is we don't always consider it in its context and so I hope you came today ready to study hard. You've got pancakes in your belly, it's time for some theological cardiovascular exercise, right? So I'm just going to tell you right now: this is not an easy passage but you can get it if you concentrate. Are you ready to do that? Because now I'm about to read from the word of God so that elevates how much attention we're going to give to this right now and try to follow carefully the logic, the argument of the text and I promise you when we're all done, we'll be able to find some very important truths that help us at Christmas time. I am in Galatians 2, beginning in verse 11 where Paul says,

11 But when Cephas [you know who that is, right? That's Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face [uh-oh], because he stood condemned.

12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles [well, of course he did]; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Now, if you say, "My head's spinning," just relax. We'll unpack that in just a minute. Then verse 15,

15 We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; 16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

We'll unpack that too. It made the same point three times. Verse 17,

17 But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! 18 For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.

Here is our key verse,

20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God [you'd never want to do that, would you?], for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.

Friends, this morning we're talking about love that delivers us from our burdens. That's what that text is all about. With the time we have remaining, let's think about three burdens our loving Savior wants to remove from your back. The first one is: Christ's love removes the burden of your legalism. Now let's think about this contextually. Many Bible students believe the book of Galatians is the first New Testament epistle to be written, probably about 52 A.D. and you can tell from the very first words I read that you are being lowered down into a hornet's nest for sure, right? If you know this book, you know that the Apostle Paul is very concerned and upset about what is occurring in this young church. He and his faithful friend and associate, Barnabas, had already been there. They had traveled to the region of Galatia during their first missionary journey and by God's grace, a number of men and women had placed their faith and trust in Christ as their

Savior and their Lord. Well, some of those people would have been Jewish and so now they are Jewish Christians. Some of them also would have been Gentiles and so now they are Gentile Christians. Well, just as Jesus had taught in places like the Upper Room, one of the results of his death, burial and resurrection was that people from different ethnic backgrounds, different economic backgrounds, different everything, could be brought together as one in the church. In fact, he even prayed to that very end, where? In the garden before he went to the cross in his high priestly prayer, John 17, "I don't ask on behalf of these alone," that is my disciples who are right here praying with me, "but for those who will believe in My name." Through their work, people like you and me. People like those in Antioch. People like those in Galatia. "That they may be," what? Not just Jews, not just Gentiles, not anything, "they may be one even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You that they also may be in Us so that the world may believe that You sent Me." That notion would have been revolutionary. Why? Well, it's because racism and division and separation and alienation are wrapped up tightly in our sin natures. Could I get an uh-huh on that that I could hear from even Faith West? There is no question about that and we're seeing the terrible effects of that even in our country today, right? Even this weekend which, by the way, is justification of Solomon's point in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Well, Christ died so that such division could be erased as a demonstration of the power of the Gospel. Now, because this would've been such a hard hurdle for someone like Peter to jump, God had already given him some experiences prior to the writing of the book of Galatians and prior to these events unfolding that we're hearing about that occurred in Antioch, God had already given Peter some up ability and reason to understand the important principle that Gentiles and Jews were being brought together in the same church. You may remember when God gave him in the book of Acts the vision of the great, what? Sheet. Do you remember that? Which contained all sorts of unclean animals with the command to Peter to do what? To arise and eat and while Peter was arguing about that in his dream, Acts 10:15 reports, "Again a voice came to him a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.'" You understand, ultimately that was not a conversation about food, ultimately that was a conversation about people. It was a conversation about ethnic groups which is why then because Peter understood that, he led the Gentile, Cornelius, to Christ and he would eventually proclaim later in that chapter, this was before what we're reading about in Galatians occurred, opening his mouth, Peter said, "I most certainly now understand that God is not one to show partiality but in every nation the man who fears him and does what is right is welcome to him."

Well, that was all well and good until a group of men that Bible students refer to as the Judaizers came along and they presented themselves according to verse 12 as being certain men from James. You say, "Who is James?" Well, James was the half-brother of Jesus, so to speak. James was the author of the, anybody want to guess? Book of James, very good, you deserve an extra Christmas present for that. And he was also, did you know, the pastor of the church at Jerusalem. Did you know that? And if you know your Bible, you know that by now, by the time the book of Galatians is written in A.D. 52, the church has already had the legalism discussion. That is described famously and Acts 15, a fascinating example of a church's business meeting because these Judaizers were saying

that in order to be saved, Gentiles first had to be circumcised. So what Christ did on the cross was not enough, a Gentile, they said, would also have to be circumcised. And then these Judaizers also proclaimed that after salvation, Jews and Gentiles continued to have to keep certain aspects of the Jewish ceremonial law, the dietary restrictions and the Sabbath restrictions or they were not truly saved.

Here's a little bit of the fireworks in Acts 15. Again remember, this precedes what we're studying in Galatians this morning. "Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles," there it is, "and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem," where James was the pastor, "they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them." That's fine enough until this, "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up," so they were Christians but they were misguided for sure if they knew Christ at all. They stood up "saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.' The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter." Well, let me skip some just for sake of time. What happens next is Peter stands up and he tells what has happened in his ministry with the Gentiles. "After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them,' way to go, Peter! You've got that right. "Cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." Exactly right.

So after that, James, who is he again? He was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem in Acts 15 summarized all that had been said by the congregation. Remember it was a business meeting and all that had been said by Paul and Barnabas and Peter and then he strongly sided against these Judaizers. Scripture says the entire church then affirmed what their pastor said and the congregation even decided to draft and send a letter to all the other churches so there was no question that Jews and Gentiles were to be welcomed equally and fully into the church of Jesus Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, completely apart from human works like circumcision or adherence to dietary laws or observance of the Sabbath or special days. But when did that happen? Here's a trivia question for this morning: when, if the book of Galatians was written about 52 A.D., when did the Jerusalem Council take place? About A.D. 49. So those decisions had already been made but now just a few years later, these Judaizers have showed up in places like Antioch and places like Galatia and even Peter, the guy who had said it correctly earlier, now he separates himself from the Gentile Christians. He won't eat with them publicly at the Lord's table because he says they are so-called sinners and the Bible tells us that that same racism, that same legalism, impacted hypocrisy is what Paul calls it, impacted the entire church. It's like they got the sack off their back and now they're putting it back on and to say that Paul would be upset about that would be the

understatement of the day. In fact, if you know the book of Galatians, you know that Paul is not a happy apostle when he writes it. In fact, he says it like this at the beginning of the letter, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different Gospel." You understand that that is not a compliment? And in case you're not clear exactly, "Is he upset with me or what?" Well, read chapter 3:1, "You foolish Galatians," imagine getting that letter at the church house. Merry Christmas. "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Christ Jesus was publicly portrayed as crucified?" Hear this: the reason all of their racism and all of their judgmentalism and all of their unbiblical separation from people they thought they were better than and division was so offensive was because Christ had come to relieve them of that burden.

Now, you might say, "Fine, take a breath, old man. That happened 2,000 years ago. Why are you dragging us into this hot mess on Christmas Sunday?" Well, it's because legalism is alive and well. Thank you for asking. That's why. In fact, many men and women who will attend our services today walked in with some kind of legalistic sack on their backs. Did you hear that? Many of the men and women who walked into our services today at both of our venues, walked in with some kind of legalistic sack on their back and it's my job to try and help us get it off, wouldn't you say? Absolutely. Merry Christmas. You say, "What are you talking about?" Well, those who would have a legalistic view of how you can be reconciled to God. You see, some who will hear this message this morning believe their relationship to God is based on their good works. They'd say, "The way I'm going to get to heaven, the reason I'm going to go to heaven is because I'm a pretty good person. I try to be kind to others. I give anybody the shirt off my back. Blah, blah, blah." In fact, some even would use the outrageous phrase to describe themselves, "Well, I'm a 10 Commandment Christian." In other words, "Because I supposedly keep the 10 Commandments, therefore, I'm going to enter heaven by my old merit." Friends, that is legalism. "I'm a child of God by keeping some aspect of the law." I realize this is a fairly nuanced text, you have to really focus on it which is hard this time of year for Americans who have visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads. I understand this is a nuanced text but follow along on Galatians 2:16. It says it three times that that approach to life won't work. "Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus," one, "even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law," two, "since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified," three. You see, if a sinful human being could be reconciled to a perfectly holy God by his or her own efforts, then why was Christmas necessary? Why didn't Jesus stay in heaven and yell down to us, "Be real good and you'll be able to earn your way to God apart from me."

Friends, I would suggest to you that this debate, "How do you get to God? How are you reconciled to God? How do you remove the sack?" That goes as far back as Genesis 4 where God apparently commanded Cain and his brother Abel to bring a meat offering because as we would later learn over and over, without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. And it wasn't the action that achieved the forgiveness but the faith necessary to do whatever God had commanded, believing he would in turn provide atonement by his grace. And so Abel obeyed God but as John MacArthur points out in

his commentary on Galatians, "When Cain offered his sacrifice of grain to the Lord, he sinned both by disobediently bringing the wrong kind of offering legalistically and by offering it in the wrong spirit. Rather than bringing an animal sacrifice as God had obviously commanded, he brought the fruits of his own labor." Do you see the legalism? "Probably supposing that his offering of disobedience was just as acceptable to God as the one he had prescribed. His was the first act of works righteousness." That's what legalism is, the forerunner of every such act since his time. "Every person of every era who has tried to come to God on the basis of his own merit and works or by some humanly designed religious prescription, has followed in the unbelieving, grace rejecting steps of Cain. By rejecting God's prescribed animal sacrifice, Cain rejected God's provision of substitutionary salvation in his Son toward which that blood offering pointed. Abel on the other hand, by obediently offering the blood sacrifice God required in faith, leaped across the centuries and touched the cross. God accepted his offering not because it had any spiritual benefit in itself but because it was presented in faith and obedience." And I would ask every person who is going to attend our services today: has there been a definite time in your life where you have acknowledged your need? You have knowledged your sin? You have acknowledged the fact that you cannot get to heaven on the basis of your own merit and you've dropped that sack of legalism and you've come to God not with your hands full of your so-called good work, but you've come with hands that are empty asking for a gift that only a loving God can provide, namely forgiveness that is available in and through the finished work of his Son? Any other attempt to come to God is simply another form of legalism which invariably dumbs down two very important points of theology, namely the sinfulness of man and the holiness of God and that will result in that sack of self righteousness and guilt and shame growing heavier and heavier year after year after year. If you say, "You're being harsh to us," no I'm not because legalism gets heavier and heavier and heavier year after year after year. In fact, perhaps we should have had, I even thought about doing this, ordering up a couple of dumpsters to put right at the front doors of both of our venues this morning because, friend, Jesus came to deliver you from the burden of that sack. That's what Paul meant when he said, "Even so Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness therefore be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." The Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, "All the nations will be blessed in you so then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." Has there ever been a time where you have accepted the gift of salvation freely by his grace?

Now, it's not just that. I realize many who hear this message today are going to say, "There's been a definite time in my life where I have trusted Christ." Well, do you realize it's possible for us to live legalistically even as Christians? You understand, that's what was happening in Galatians in chapter 2. It wasn't a question about whether or not Peter was a Christian, the issue is and Paul was very clear, he was living hypocritically, why? Because of his legalistic separation from other people. Christians can do that too, hun? Huh? Huh? Separating from people of other ethnic groups believing, "I am better than them." Separating from people from other economic groups believing, "I'm better than them." Separating from people who live over on that side of the tracks because, "I'm better than them." People who are struggling with this particular habit or that one

believing, "I'm better than them and I'm better than them and I'm better than them." It's very easy for all of us to adopt the belief that we're better than so-called classes of people and because Peter was behaving that way publicly, Paul called him out on it publicly. Such behavior is just an attempt to elevate self. That's what Paul said, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof. That's what racism does. That's what any form of unbiblical separation does. It's an attempt to make myself look good by not being associated with others. Paul said such behavior is motivated by the fear of man. "What will the beautiful people think if I'm eating with the Gentiles? What will the beautiful people think if I accept those who are different or those who are considered inferior by others?"

Paul said such behavior makes you a sinner. Verse 17, "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners," now, this is one of those after lunch kind of "I'd better read those verses again" kind of discussions because Paul's logic is very important to follow here. "Peter, think back to what you said at the Jerusalem Council. You said God told you to minister the Gospel to the Gentiles. If you're now three years later taking the position that that is wrong, you're indicting yourself which ultimately," Paul says, "would be indicting Christ." Such behavior would make Christ a minister of sin. "But if," verse 17, "while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!" The point was since Jesus is the one who taught us to live this way and then died so it would be possible, if you're now going to fall back into legalism, ultimately that suggests that Jesus is the one who is the source of sin.

Now, I realize this is pretty nuanced theologically. I understand that we're kind of at the 30,000 foot level. Let's bring that down to where we live and minister today. I would suggest the principle we're talking about this morning fuels this theme that we've been trying to develop all year long. It drives a substantial part of our church's philosophy of ministry. Why? If you throw off the sack of legalistic treatment of others, you're freed up to love those in our community with the hope that many will come to Christ. You see, I'm convinced of this: there are far too many churches that are not getting much done for God because they are essentially operating on the principle of "we don't want those kind of people around here." And you can fill in the blank with whatever ethnic group, with whatever economic group up or down you want to fill in, with whatever class of person who might be sinning in a particular way but there is a silent, unstated but very powerful agreement among many persons and many churches, "We don't want those kind of people around here." Welcome to the sack of legalism. Welcome to exactly what Peter was doing in this text, thinking that he needed to separate himself from certain so-called sinful groups of people in order to receive the praise of men.

We want to be the polar opposite of that. We want to be the anti-Galatian church on that point and that's why we've designed so many of our church's ministries in order to try to reach, in order to show love to those who might be hurting. So why do we have a counseling center? Do you think people come to our counseling center and report that everything is going well between them and God and all their friends? No, the people who are broken down and we would say to them, "We want to love you." Why do we have a

community center? Exactly the same reason because, "We want to meet your needs. We want to love you." You've heard of this particular emphasis we're doing right now over the next couple of weeks in trying to provide safe child care for families who still have to work even though their kids are off for two weeks. You might say, "Well, why in the world would we do that?" Because it's a need. What does love do? Love identifies needs and then tries to bring resources along in order to meet them. I realize some might say, "Oh but, all those ragamuffins." Because that was like 170 kids from our two ministry parishes signed up to be part of that ministry over the next couple of weeks. "Those ragamuffins. I bet they're going to have bad language." Yeah, I bet they are. "I bet they are going to have bad habits." Yeah. "I bet they're going to tear stuff down. Blah, blah, blah." Are we going to take the position that we don't want those kind of kids around here? Because you understand, a significant percentage of those persons, we've gone through the names, we've never heard those names before. We have absolutely no contact with those families before and presumably many of them would be unchurched.

Do we want persons like that around here or not? And do we want to design ministries that would reach such persons like that or not? You see, the beauty is, when you drop the bag of legalism, then the ground is really level at the cross, right? It's not like we're all that and a bag of chips. You see, when it comes right down to it, here's a hard question, Merry Christmas: are you more like Jesus or more like the people that we're still trying to reach for Christ? Do you strut around like you're all that and it's you and Jesus and all those bad people? If you understand the sinfulness that resides in our hearts and if we understand the perfect holiness of God, we would never be judgmental of any other person regardless of where they are struggling forever and we would be motivated in our hearts to try to love persons around us in whatever way we possibly can. You see, legalism hinders us from loving our neighbors and getting that sack off our back is what motivates us to love.

We're praying toward the development of this property out at Bethany Farms. We'd like to start a ministry for men who are struggling out at Bethany Farms. Well, think about that: if God allows that dream of our congregation to come true, what is that going to mean? There are going to be more guys running around this church who have been struggling with all sorts of things. Well, are they going to be welcome around here? Are they going to be welcome around here? Merry stinking Christmas. Are they going to be welcome around here? They had better be, right? They can sit right next to the hypocrites and backbiters. In case you're not sure who I'm talking about, I'll meet with you after the service. I mean, the bottom line is, aren't they? Sure, we want them to be growing just like all of us need to be growing.

There is some discussion going around our congregation right now about a problem until a month ago I didn't even know was occurring. It's the issue of sex trafficking right here in this town. I'm not talking about Los Angeles. I'm not talking about Chicago. I'm talking about at the intersection of State Road 26 and I65. The hotels I go by every morning religiously and legalistically to get my cup of coffee from McDonald's. What's happening is, you have these teen runaways from all over the country who are being linked up with persons who end up being sex traffickers and because of the efficacy of

social media, they can put out a flash announcement that they are going to be at one of these hotels right here at State Road 26 and I65 and they'll put out an announcement that if you'd like to have sex with a boy, if you'd like to have sex with a girl, we're going to be at such-and-such a hotel and you can meet us there at that time. That's happening right here in this town and what our prosecutor is telling us is that when they break a ring like that up they obviously know what to do with the adults, what do you do with the kids? What do you do with the teen runaways who have been sex trafficked? And there are some persons around here who are saying, "Can we build a facility here that would be a place that the police could send them? That could be a place that the prosecutor and our legal system could send them? Where those young people could find hope? Those young people could find healing? We could provide the counseling resources? We could provide the kind of restorative resources perhaps in many cases eventually reuniting them with their families?" What do you think the answer to that question is? Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes. But we just have to decide because you understand what that means as far as the impact that might have on this church family and when you've got a whole bunch of people who have dropped the sack of legalism from their backs, then there is plenty of grace for anyone who is in need.

Now, this text would also teach us that Christ's love removes the burden of your hopelessness. You see, having the sack removed is not the end of the process. Now you can live unto God. That's exactly what verse 19 means, "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God." I realize you might say, "Paul makes my head hurt." I know. Many of you have got this week off, chew on verses like this. It's good for you. Here is the point: the law was never intended to save. It was intended to condemn and lead me to my need of a Savior which is why Paul would later say, "Therefore the law became our tutor, our schoolmaster, to lead us to Christ so that we may be justified by faith." Well, what happens after we're led to Christ? The answer is: a lot of the things in that sack are related to your sins and your failures and your weaknesses and the day you come to Christ, your relationship with everything in the sack changes. Now you can be different because of the power of your union with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." That's why you don't have to go through life hopeless. That's why, because of the effect and work of the one who loved you, you can now change. Which is why Paul would later say in this book, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." And I realize some who hear this message might say, "Yeah, I'm ever going to be loving? I'm ever going to be joyful? I'm ever going to be peaceful? I'm ever going to be patient?" Listen, don't ever insult the power of the person who stands ready to take the sack off your back. And the beauty is because of the power of the Holy Spirit of God and the person of Christ to whom you become united when you trust him, you can dramatically change. Do you realize that for some who will be with us today, they can think back over this past year to real victories they've seen in their Christian lives? Differences in their personal lives? Real change in their marriages? Real change and improvement in the way they are raising their kids or overcoming some sinful habit? And for them, Christmas this year is not going to be that. For them, Christmas this

year is going to be that, the joy and the power of the sack being removed by our sufficient Savior. Bunyan wrote,

Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which Christian was to go, was fenced on either side with a wall, and that wall was called Salvation. Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death."

Christ came and Christ died so that you could be delivered from the sinful habits carried in that sack. Now, could I suggest to you that if everything I'm saying this morning is true, it not only impacts the way you think about yourself but it impacts the way you think about everybody else because I fully realize that I need to pastor us right now but a number of the members of our church and persons who are going to be here today, you're about to be around some very difficult people in the next few days. I'm talking about your family, right? You can pick your friends but you can't pick your family and all of that. Can I just say this to you: don't give up on them and please don't be sinfully judgmental toward them. Maybe they are carrying a burden. Do you realize, maybe they act the way they act because they have a burden on their back and they don't know how to get it off. Perhaps God can use the way you love them as a means of God drawing them to himself.

One last idea: Christ's love removes the burden of your own perfectionism. Let me talk to you for a minute about your Christmas outfit and your holiday table. Can I do that? Do you realize that if you're in Christ, if that's your identity then being the perfect body weight, for example, shouldn't be very important, right? What that means is: perfectionism will rob you of your joy in Christ about as quickly as anything. True? So maybe during Christmas season while you survey the dessert table, the appropriate position to take should be, "Since I'm in Christ, the more of me the better." Right? A larger canvas on which the beauty of Jesus may be displayed. That's sound theology right there, baby. So let's not become so perfectionistic that we're robbed of the joy of Christmas. And maybe having the perfect holiday table isn't that important. Maybe having the perfect holiday meal isn't something we're going to get all wound up about. Maybe our identity isn't wrapped up in everybody else's opinion so if you try to make these and they end up looking like that. Nailed it. Nailed it. Maybe that's not the end of the world, huh? It might be the end of you ever being asked to bring bread to the Christmas dinner but you see, if you're in Christ, there is no room for, there's no need for, the sack of perfectionism. Just leave that at the dumpster on the way out. Paul said it was

for freedom that Christ set us free, therefore, keep standing firm and don't be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

So let's not be perfectionists with ourselves, let's not be perfectionistic with one another and this Christmas, if we happen to think about Christmas and a person carrying a sack, let's remember that and let's rejoice because of that.

Would you stand with me for prayer?

Father in heaven, thank you for the opportunity to think about how much Jesus loved us and what an incredible burden has been lifted from our backs and so, Lord, if there are persons here who have not yet trusted Christ, I pray that they would and for those of us who would say that we're saved, Lord, I pray that we would never let that sack of legalism find its way on our backs again. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.