

Galatians

Freedom in Christ (Part Two)

Galatians 5:7-12

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Scripture

“Paul’s doctrine of grace is dangerous!” cried the false teachers in Galatia. “It replaces law with license. Why, if we do away with our rules and abandon our high standards, the churches will fall apart.”

Those first century false teachers, known as Judaizers or legalists, were not the only ones afraid to depend on God’s grace.

In our churches today we have many who are afraid to depend on God’s grace. There is a continuing misunderstanding of the doctrine of grace. And that is why Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians.

Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians to counter the false teaching of the Judaizers. The first two chapters of Galatians are personal in which Paul defends his apostleship.

Chapters 3 and 4 are doctrinal in which Paul defends the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Now, beginning in chapter 5, Paul begins a section which is application. He now begins to apply the doctrine of justification by faith to our personal lives.

The Christian who lives by faith alone is not going to fall into license or legalism, Paul explains. Instead, he will be led by the Spirit of God to obey all that God has commanded. He will be governed by faith and not by the flesh. He will look to Christ for his source of power and not try to find the power within himself. He will recognize that all self-effort is doomed to frustration and disappointment.

Let’s see how the apostle Paul put it in Galatians 5. I will begin reading in Galatians 5:1, although our text for today is found in Galatians 5:7-12:

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 law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit 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 and kept 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 will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. ¹¹ Brothers, 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!** (Galatians 5:7-12)

Introduction

In a recent NCAA cross-country championship held in Riverside, California, 123 of the 128 runners missed a turn. One competitor, Mike Delcavo, stayed on the 10,000-meter course and began waving for fellow runners to follow him. Delcavo was able to convince only four other runners to go with him.

Asked what his competitors thought of his mid-race decision not to follow the crowd, Delcavo responded, “They thought it was funny that I went the right way.”

Delcavo was one who ran correctly. In the same way, our goal is to run correctly—to finish the race marked out for us by Christ.

The apostle Paul is waving to us to follow him in the passage before us. He knows that some believers have followed the wrong leaders, and now he writes to show us the right path.

Review

Let us review what we covered last time in Galatians 5:1-6.

I. The Thesis Concerning our Freedom (5:1)

Paul begins his discussion with the thesis concerning our freedom. He first gives a statement, and then follows it up with a command.

A. The Statement (5:1a)

Paul's statement is that "it is for freedom that Christ has set you free" (5:1a).

B. The Command (5:1b)

Paul's command is in the second part of verse 1, where he says, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1b).

II. The Consequences of Embracing Works (5:2-6)

After making a statement concerning our freedom in Christ, Paul then gives us four consequences of embracing works as the basis of trying to gain right standing with God.

A. Christ Will Have No Value (5:2)

The first consequence of embracing works is that Christ will have no value. We will want to add our righteousness to the perfect

righteousness of Christ, and as soon as we do that Christ becomes of no value to us. That is why the apostle Paul says in verse 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.”

B. We Will Have to Keep the Whole Law (5:3)

The second consequence of embracing works is that we will have to keep the whole law. We cannot pick and choose which laws to obey. God only accepts perfection into heaven and therefore if we try to justify ourselves by our own efforts at obeying the law, we would need to obey every single law. And so Paul says in verse 3: “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.”

C. We Will Fall from Grace (5:4)

The third consequence of embracing works is that we will fall from grace. We cannot lose our salvation. Paul does not say that we will fall from salvation. Rather, we will fall from the sphere of God’s grace. Paul says in verse 4: “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

D. We will Abandon Faith for Works (5:5-6)

The final consequence of embracing works is that we will abandon faith for works. We begin operating out of the flesh instead of faith. We are governed by the law instead of the Spirit. That is why Paul says in verses 5-6: “But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Lesson

Having discussed the consequences of embracing works, Paul now concludes this section by asking some questions for those who have “fallen away from grace.”

III. Questions for Those Who Have “Fallen Away from Grace” (5:7-12)

Paul’s intense love for Christians trapped by works shines in Galatians 5:7-12. Here he expresses belief in them and comes down hard on those who have led the Galatians astray.

A. *Who Tripped You Up? (5:7)*

The first question Paul asks is, “Who tripped you up?”

Paul asks in verse 7, **“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”**

Paul acknowledges that the Galatian Christians started the race well. They started the Christian life trusting in Christ’s righteousness and basking in the warmth of God’s grace. But someone cut in on them and caused them to slip and fall in their obedience of the truth.

I remember the 1988 Summer Olympic Games that were held in Los Angeles. One of the key events was the race between the United States’ darling, Mary Decker, and the young South African phenomenon, Zola Budd, who was actually running for Great Britain. I believe the race in which they met was the women’s 5,000 meter race. After a few laps Zola Budd attempted to pass Mary Decker and cut in front of her. Somehow she clipped Mary Decker who fell, and was out of the race. I can still picture Mary lying on the grass in pain, crying with frustration and disappointment. Eventually she was literally carried off the field, still in shock and disappointment.

Paul is saying that the Galatians are like Mary Decker. They started a good race but someone cut in on them and they have lost their joy (cf. 4:15). Bruised and battered, they are being carried off the field by works. Where there was once joy there is now discouragement and disappointment.

It is so with everyone who starts the Christian life by grace and then surrenders to works. Joy is replaced with burden. Delight is replaced with frustration and disappointment.

B. What Effect Is Works Having? (5:8-9)

The second question Paul asks in effect is, “What effect is works having?”

Paul reminds the Galatians that God would not have hindered them in this way. The Lord had given them a radically new life. He had not let them run freely in order to trip them up and burden them down. This is what Paul says in verse 8: **“That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.”** This obstacle came from another source—one whose contaminating works had spread throughout the whole church, slowly but surely. Paul says, **“A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough”** (5:9).

That’s how it is with works. If you give in even a little, it will eventually permeate every facet of your life and cause you untold misery.

C. Where Will Works Lead? (5:10)

Third, Paul asks, “Where will works lead?”

Paul is confident that the Galatian Christians will realize their error, shed their self-righteousness, and return to a grace-oriented life. He says in verse 10a, **“I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view.”** And then he adds, **“The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be”** (5:10b).

God does not treat false teachers lightly. In fact, since God holds those who teach more accountable than those who do not (cf. James 3:1), we can be sure that teachers who mislead God's people will be judged severely, if they don't repent (cf. also Matthew 18:5-9; Galatians 1:8-9).

It is a tremendous responsibility to teach God's Word. I feel so keenly the importance of being faithful to God's Word. I also feel very keenly the importance of not leading you astray.

Will you pray for me? Will you pray asking God to help me study the Word well and to prepare well so that I might teach faithfully?

And also pray for all our teachers, whether they are Sunday School teachers or Bible study leaders.

Everyone who teaches God's Word will have to give an account for his or her teaching on the day we meet the Lord.

D. Why Are You Still Being Persecuted? (5:11-12)

And finally Paul asks, "Why are you still being persecuted?"

The legalists claimed that Paul was really in their camp on the issue of circumcision. I suspect they pointed to the time when Paul circumcised Timothy (cf. Acts 16:1-3). Because of Timothy's good reputation, Paul wanted to take him along on their missionary journey. There was a problem, however. The Jews to whom Paul would be preaching the gospel would be offended if a man with a Jewish mother was uncircumcised. So Timothy was circumcised.

Now this appears to contradict Paul's teaching concerning circumcision in Galatians 2:3-5 where he refused to let Titus be circumcised.

The two situations, however, were different. In Galatians 2 Paul is defending the doctrine of justification by faith and not by works. In Acts 16 Paul did not want circumcision to be an obstacle to obtain a hearing for the gospel. Paul acted for the sake of the gospel, and it was a prudent move on his part.

At any rate, the Judaizers tried to convince the Galatian believers that Paul did teach a faith-plus-works salvation. Paul wields a decisive blow to their claim. **“Brothers,”** he asks in verse 11a, **“if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?”**

The gospel is naturally offensive to people. Our pride leads us to believe that our own righteousness is pleasing and acceptable to God. The reason Paul is still being persecuted is because he is not preaching self-righteousness but the cross. If he were preaching circumcision, then there would be no offense from the cross. As he says, **“In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished”** (5:11b).

To make his meaning even clearer Paul concludes, **“As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!”** (5:12). To understand Paul’s statement, it is helpful to know that Galatia was near Phrygia, and the great worship of that part of the world was of Cybele. It was the practice that priests and really devout worshippers of Cybele mutilated themselves by castration. Paul suggests, in the strongest terms, that the Judaizers go the whole way and castrate themselves. Their circumcision is in reality exactly the same as castration as far as God is concerned: it is of no value.

Self-righteousness counts for nothing. No matter how small our self-righteousness. It is a stench in the nostrils of almighty God. To think that we can add anything of our self-righteousness to the perfect righteousness of Christ is foolishness in the extreme.

Conclusion

Ours is an age of tolerance. People love to have the best of all worlds. They hate to be forced to choose. It is commonly said that it doesn’t matter what people believe so long as they are sincere, and that it is unwise to clarify issues too plainly or focus them too sharply.

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Christianity will not allow us to sit on the fence or live in a haze. The gospel urges us to be definite and decisive. In particular, it urges us to choose between our own righteousness and the righteousness of Christ. “Circumcision” stands for a religion of human achievement, of what a person can attain by his own righteousness. “Faith” stands for a religion of divine achievement, of what God has done through the finished work of Christ.

Circumcision means law, works, and bondage. Christ means grace, faith and freedom. Every person must choose. The Galatians were trying both. You cannot have it both ways. You must choose one or the other.

Galatians calls us to abandon our own self-righteousness. It calls us to throw ourselves completely at the foot of the cross and cling to the righteousness of Christ alone for our salvation. We begin the Christian life by faith. But then we also continue the Christian life by faith. We never let go of trusting in the righteousness of Christ for our acceptance with God.

May God help us to trust him always and never our own righteousness. Amen.

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