

Stand Firm in Freedom & Show it by Love

Galatians 5:1-15

Why do so many seem to miss or ignore the fact that we are free in Christ? Why are so many reticent to accept that we are no longer subject to having to live under the law? Why do so many people in churches today seem to resist the principles of freedom taught in the book of Galatians? The fear of many is that if we take away all of our rules, people will be out of control. If we teach people about liberty in Christ, there will be religious anarchy. Such will not in fact be the case when the teaching of God's Word is properly understood and applied.

In chapter 5 of Galatians, Paul transitions from doctrine to application. In chapters 1-4, Paul has established the doctrine of sanctification by faith. He has demonstrated in these chapters that those who are justified by faith in Christ should also pursue sanctification on the same basis of faith. They are free from slavery to law and it would not make any sense at all to go back to living under the law. In chapters 5-6, Paul shows the relationship of the doctrinal truth he has presented thus far to our practical, daily living. He shows how our liberty in Christ will and should relate to our daily conduct. As we will see, a proper understanding and application of what it means to live by faith and be free in Christ will not make us rebels who do whatever we want, but will rather make us people who live and love like Jesus.

Stand firm in Christ's freedom and stop allowing yourselves to be made subject again to an enslaving system of law (5:1)

Paul has just addressed at the end of chapter four how believers in Christ are related to Sarah, the free woman. In Christ, we are free and it is His intent that we enjoy our liberty. We are free from servitude to sin that once bound us. We are free from subjection to the Mosaic Law which once held us in its debt. It was for the purpose of securing this freedom that Jesus was crucified for us. We need to stand firm in the freedom our Lord has given us. We need to remain unwavering in our faith in Christ to transform our lives, recognizing that it is our faith in Him that serves as the basis of our sanctification.

Paul exhorts the Galatians not to allow themselves to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. We might wonder why Paul would write "again" when he is addressing Gentile believers who were never under the Mosaic Law in the first place. Notice Paul writes, "a yoke of slavery" not "the yoke" of slavery.

Previously, the Galatians were slaves under a pagan system of rules keeping that enslaved them. If they go back under a system of legalism, even Jewish legalism under the Mosaic Law, they would still be going back to slavery. Paul exhorts the Galatians to stop allowing this to happen.

The danger of legalism: by accepting a system of law as being the necessary standard we have to keep in order to attain God's blessing and righteousness, we pull ourselves away from Christ and His work (5:2-4)

The Judaizers are heavily pressuring the Galatian believers to embrace the teaching that if we are to please God and receive His blessings, we have to live under the Law He has established. They are pressuring the Galatians to be circumcised. The problem with circumcision isn't circumcision itself. Paul writes in verse 6- "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value." Paul wasn't against circumcision per se. For example, in Acts 16:3, we see that Paul had Timothy circumcised for the sake of a more effective testimony to the Jews. In Acts 21:21, we see that Paul didn't even advocate the end of circumcision as part of the Jewish religious heritage. What Paul did have a significant problem with is taking part in this rite thinking that it was the means through which one would obtain merit in God's sight. What Paul had a problem with is what circumcision had come to represent per the teaching of the Judaizers—namely entrance into the whole legal system—the system which leads people to try to please God and gain His favor by means of works of the Law.

In response to the pressure of the Galatians by the Judaizers to be circumcised, Paul warns them of the problems of trying to mix law and grace. The two systems contradict one another. They deny one another and cancel each other out. They can't co-exist as both can't be true at the same time. Either, we please God by walking by faith in the power of His Spirit or we try to please God and sanctify ourselves by our efforts to keep the law. Law says we have to do something to merit God's blessing. Grace says that we can't do anything to merit His blessing and that everything depends on Him.

In verses two through four, Paul introduces four implications of following a legal system of trying to live by the rules.

When we subject ourselves to law:

Christ becomes useless to us

Can you imagine ever saying that the death of Christ was completely useless and unnecessary? If we maintain that by keeping the law, we can earn points with God, that we can gain the necessary merit we need before Him, then whether we realize it or not, that is exactly what we are saying. Our efforts to establish our own righteousness by law keeping is essentially a statement that we don't need Christ and that His death is meaningless. Let's ask ourselves the important question—"Do we recognize that all that is of value and merit is based on what Christ did on the cross for us or do we subject ourselves to law keeping, believing there to be value and merit in what we do, and thereby say that Christ is of no value to us at all?" It is one or the other. The two paths are mutually exclusive. Which is it for us?

John MacArthur writes, "The atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, perfect and complete though it was, cannot benefit a person who trusts in anything else, because that something else, whether circumcision or any other human act or effort, then stands between him and Christ...To trust in circumcision or any other personal effort as a means of grace is to supplement His divine work with human work; and a supplemented Christ is a supplanted Christ. To trust in human effort is to trust in law, which is totally incompatible with grace....Whether before or after conversion, trust in human works of any kind is a barrier between a person and Christ and results in unacceptable legalism."

We obligate ourselves to obey the entire law

Again, circumcision was considered to be the entry point to becoming a part of God's people under the law. If a person entered into and subjected himself to this legal system, Paul wanted this person to realize what he was getting into—the requirement of the law is that he obey all of it. Obeying a little bit of God's Law here and there won't do anyone a bit of good. There is no good enough when it comes to trying to please God by living by the law. Again, Paul is demonstrating the mutual exclusivity of law and grace. There is a common notion today that pleasing God and gaining His favor is a matter of faith in Christ plus works of the law. Such a notion fails to understand what putting oneself under the works of the law requires. Under the law, the requirement to gain merit and favor by it is to keep all of it—the whole thing without fail.

Gromacki writes, “On the basis of legalism there is no reason why faith in Christ is even required. It is negated by the obligation of human effort.” Faith and works of law squeeze each other out. We have to make a choice between one or the other. Which do you want?—Law which requires total obedience to satisfy God? or faith which rests in what Christ has done?

We alienate ourselves from Christ

Any attempt to be justified by law alienates and pulls a person away from Christ. When a person tries to establish his own righteousness by what he does, he separates himself from Christ’s righteousness. Again, law and grace are opposing methods of receiving righteousness. Pursuing one severs us from the other.

We have fallen from grace

Let’s be clear here on what Paul does not mean. Paul is not here dealing with the security of a believer’s salvation. He is not teaching that a person who has once been justified can lose his righteous standing before God. Such teaching is in contradiction to passages of Scripture which clearly affirm that our salvation cannot be lost.

By falling from grace, Paul is referring to our falling away from a system. Again, demonstrating the mutual exclusivity of law and grace, Paul asserts that when we place ourselves under the system of law, we move away from the system of grace. Again, we come to God and please Him by law or grace, it can’t be both. It’s not a little bit of one added to a little bit of the other. When subjection to law sneaks in, we are moving away from grace.

Our hope of righteousness, for which we eagerly wait, comes through the Spirit, not through the flesh, and by faith, not by the law (5:5-6)

Our hope is not in righteousness we attain by what we do in keeping the law. Rather, our hope rests in the righteousness Christ gives us by God’s grace both in the practical sense here and now and in the absolute sense when He comes again and closes the deal, making us fully like Him. This righteousness for which we hope comes by the Spirit’s power, and not by the flesh—that is our efforts independent of God. This righteousness comes by our faith in Christ, not by works of the law.

For those in Christ, obedience to the law has no value. We don't depend on observance of the law at all as it relates to living a life that pleases God. Whether we have been circumcised or not is of no consequence to our standing before God. What does matter is that we have faith in Christ, the kind of faith that demonstrates its presence through works of love.

The problems with those who promote legalism (5:7-12)

Paul next addresses the problems with what the Judaizers were doing and teaching. He sees how they have been the catalyst behind the Galatians' departure from the truth and wants to expose them for who they really are so as to steer the Galatians away from them.

They bump us off the course of obedience to the truth (5:7)

The responsibility of the true follower of Christ is to teach others to observe all that Christ has commanded. In contrast to this, the Judaizers were doing just the opposite. They were leading the Galatians away from obedience to the truth. The Galatians had been running a good race. They had been living the Christian life in the power of the Spirit and by faith. However, the Judaizers cut in on them. Paul here uses an analogy from athletics. In a running race, runners are supposed to stay in their lanes if you will. There are inevitably some runners in every big race who will intentionally cut in on their competitors to try to break their stride, to cause them to stumble, to get them off course. Spiritually, this is exactly what the Judaizers were doing to the Galatians. Their teaching that works of the law are necessary to gain God's blessing put obstacles in their way that got them off course and impeded their progress.

The source of their teaching isn't God (5:8)

The teaching of the Judaizers didn't come from God. The God who called the Galatians to live by faith in Christ and empowered by the Spirit wouldn't contradict Himself by calling on them to live under a legalistic system. God clearly wouldn't call them to a life of faith and then put obstacles in their way as they tried to live in that way. Legalism is never from God.

A little bit of their influence contaminates the whole church (5:9)

Paul warns the Galatians of the pervasive, permeating nature of false teaching. Using an analogy from baking, Paul compares the teaching of the Judaizers to a little yeast that works through the whole batch of dough. Because of how quickly a few false teachers and their false doctrine can contaminate the whole church, no provision should be allowed for the legalist to present their views. Because of how even a little bit of legalism has so much dangerous potential, the Judaizers need to be stopped before their teaching gains any more traction.

Their teaching will bring God's judgment upon them (5:10)

Paul remains confident that the Galatians won't continue to follow in the Judaizers' footsteps. He is confident that they will reject legalism for a life of faith. He is also confident that whoever is responsible for throwing the Galatians into confusion will pay a penalty. He will face God's judgment and punishment. Paul addresses an individual here; whereas, elsewhere in the book he addresses a group of men. Perhaps he is specifically addressing the ring leader.

Kent writes, "Whoever the enemy was, whether one or many, God would deal with him. He could not find escape in pleading good intentions or failure to hear the truth. The guilty must bear his guilt."

They persecute and make unfounded accusations against true teachers (5:11)

As we already noted earlier, Paul had Timothy circumcised for the sake of having a more effective testimony to the Jews. Also, Paul didn't advocate the end of circumcision as part of the Jewish religious heritage (Acts 21:21). Paul's practice was to become like a Jew when he was with the Jews so as to reach the Jews. As the Judaizers observed what Paul did among the Jews, they made the claim that Paul was still preaching about circumcision the same way they were—claiming that it was required in order to live the Christian life in a manner that pleased God.

Paul points out that if he is still preaching circumcision as the Judaizers claim he is, why are they then persecuting him? The fact that Paul is being persecuted by the Judaizers surely cancels out their charge that he was proclaiming circumcision as a requirement for becoming or living like a Christian as they did.

Paul also addresses the fact that if he is still preaching circumcision, then the offense of the cross to the Jewish would be abolished. Clearly, the offense of the cross had not been abolished as Paul was being persecuted for proclaiming the cross of Christ.

In principle, they are no different than self-mutilating pagans (5:12)

In order to understand what Paul says in verse 12, we need to know a little bit about the historical background of this statement. By his mention of self-mutilation, Paul is probably referring to the cult of Cybele, a popular pagan nature goddess in Asia Minor during his day. According to MacArthur, “Many devout male worshipers in the cult castrated themselves, and all its priests were self-made eunuchs.” By his statement, Paul might be saying, “If you want a system of legalistic works to please God, why stop at circumcision? They might as well go all the way and imitate their pagan neighbors.”

Paul highlights by his statement that there is no essential difference between what pagans do to try to please their gods and what the Judaizers are doing to try to please their God. Paul’s strong statement shows that he has absolutely no tolerance towards the advocating of adding works to obtain God’s blessing, either for salvation or for our walk with God. He makes a strong statement to really grab the Galatians’ attention.

Remembering back to our introduction, let’s consider again the common objection to teaching the freedom we have in Christ. The statement “We’re free!” brings some to conclude, “We can have things our way and do whatever we want; no one can tell us what to do.” This confusion of freedom with anarchy is one of the very reasons that many who espouse legalism object to teaching that emphasizes grace, faith, and freedom in Christ. In the first verse of chapter five, Paul spoke of the Christian’s freedom and warned against the danger of lapsing into slavery to the law. In verse thirteen, Paul again reminds us of our freedom in Christ, but here warns against its being converted into a basis for licentious living. We are free in Christ, but we need to recognize how God intends that we apply and use our freedom properly.

Use freedom in Christ properly (5:13-15)

Our freedom isn't intended to be used as a license to indulge our flesh and do whatever we want regardless of what God wants (5:13a)

Authentic Christian liberty isn't intended as a base of operations to satisfy our own selfish desires. Liberty isn't synonymous with licentiousness. Freedom from the restraints of the law doesn't give us the basis to begin a campaign of sinful indulgence.

The intended use of our freedom is that we serve one another in love (5:13b)

The proper use of our freedom in Christ is to volunteer to serve as slaves or servants of one another in love. The outward compulsion of a legal system can't produce this response, but the indwelling Spirit can and does as we submit to the Spirit's control and rely on His power.

We are all slaves to something.

Some are slaves to sin and its penalty. This is something that is both involuntary in that we were all born into this state and voluntary in that we all choose to sin. We remain in this terrible state until we trust Christ who frees us from the penalty and bondage of sin.

Some are slaves to law, a legal system, a list of rules. This slavery is voluntary—it is established by our personal choice. It puts us under tremendous burden and always ends up condemning us and producing guilt. We will remain in this terrible state until we recognize that we can't please God by our best efforts to keep the rules. We will remain in this state until we trust Christ to form in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, a life that pleases Him.

Some are freed from both bondage to sin and to a legalistic system, but have become voluntary slaves to others by the work and power of God's Spirit, committed to loving and serving them. This slavery results in a real contentment. This form of slavery is really the greatest freedom.

The law is fulfilled when freedom is applied properly (5:14)

While we as believers in Christ are free from the precepts of the law, we will find that the principle of love which permeated the Mosaic Law and summarized it will be realized and fulfilled in us as we trust in Christ to produce His love in us by the power of the Spirit and thereby properly apply the freedom we enjoy in Him.

When liberty is viewed as license to live however or when legalism is promoted, the result is destructive behavior (5:15)

Paul here makes an observation and issues a warning. His observation is that the legalism of the Judaizers and the misuse of liberty combined to form an atmosphere of destructive criticism. His warning is that if such criticism doesn't stop, the Galatians would essentially act as cannibals, spiritually devouring one another.

Implications for our lives today:

Remember that grace and works of the law are like oil and water, they don't mix

Don't pull away from Christ and His work by subjecting yourself to a law keeping system

Enjoy and celebrate your liberty in Christ by serving one another in love

Stand firm in freedom & show it by your love!