

Christian Freedom

Lesson Text: Galatians 5:1-15. **Devotional Reading:** 1 Peter 2:11-17.

Background Scripture: Galatians 5:1-15.

Time: probably A.D. 48 **Place:** from Syrian Antioch

Galatians 5:1-15

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 the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.* ⁵ *For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith 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 to keep 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, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.* ¹¹ *Brothers and sisters, 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!*

¹³ *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.* ¹⁴ *For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”* ¹⁵ *If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Explain how God's grace sets us free from bondage to the law.
2. Make the connection between their freedom from the law and their responsibility to love.
3. Identify one way to show love to a Christian brother or sister during the coming week.

Introduction

Living in a free country means that citizens are afforded certain basic rights. Among the most cherished liberties given to citizens of the United States of America are the freedom of the press, the freedom of speech, and the freedom of religion.

Sadly, many throughout the world do not enjoy these freedoms, at least to the extent that Americans do. Oppressive governments tell people what they can write, say, or practice religiously. This is one reason many people want to emigrate to the United States and other free nations of the world.

Even though Paul was a Roman citizen (cf. Acts 16:37), he never enjoyed the freedoms that millions enjoy in the modern free world. Slavery pervaded the ancient world, and Paul recognized the value of freedom (1 Cor. 7:21). No one who has tasted liberty would want to return to slavery, yet that was exactly what the Galatians seemed to be doing. Having tasted gospel liberty, they were casting it aside to be enslaved again by the Mosaic law

Lesson Background

Today's lesson (and next week's as well) will focus on how the free Christian should live. Our study last week concluded with Paul's statement of our special status in Christ. We are no longer servants, but sons and heirs (Galatians 4:7).

With chapter 5, Paul moves from the theological to the practical (as he usually does in his letters to churches). This section includes several personal exhortations to the Galatians to remain faithful to Christ.

Liberty in the Lord (Galatians 5:1)

Paul exhorts the Galatians (and us) to stand fast ... in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. We should adamantly refuse to go back to a life characterized by slavery to sin. Paul's words offer a special challenge to avoid the kind of slavery promoted by the Judaizers, who insist that obedience to the law is a condition of salvation.

Notice Paul's reference to a yoke of bondage. If the Galatians listened to the Judaizers, there was a very real danger of becoming *"burdened again by a yoke of slavery,"* A yoke is a heavy piece of equipment used on an animal to keep it under control, especially to do farm work. It is a fitting way to illustrate the burdensome demands of the law of Moses. Even Peter used this same word picture when he addressed the Jerusalem Conference concerning the issue of Gentile Christians and the law. He referred to the law as a yoke that *"neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?"* (Acts 15:10). Jesus also used a yoke as a figure of speech, but in a much different way. He assures us that His yoke is *"easy"* and His burden is *"light"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

As a Pharisee, Paul knew what it was like to be bound to rules and regulations. Once he tasted gospel liberty, though, he was unwilling to be shackled to the Mosaic law again. Paul earnestly desires that the Galatians and all Christians enjoy their freedom in Christ.

1. In what were the Galatians to stand fast? What would happen if they did not stand fast (Galatians 5:1)?

Liberty from the Law (Galatians 5:2-6)

Perhaps Paul was appealing to apostolic authority when he said, "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you..." However, he may have been reminding them that he knew them personally, having founded the churches of Galatia. Since they had come to Christ under his ministry, what he had to say about this issue was extremely relevant.

As pointed out in previous lessons, the Judaizers wanted to require Gentile converts to obey certain rituals of the law. Especially important to them was the rite of circumcision, the sign of the old covenant (Gen. 17:10). In fact, they were adding this to the plan of salvation (Acts 15:1).

To add anything to the Word of God is very serious (cf. Rev. 22:18-19). So grave was this issue that those who submitted to circumcision were actually renouncing Christ as Savior, for Paul declared, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal. 5:2). This, of course, refers to circumcision as a religious rite, not as a medical procedure.

While the Judaizers were probably not demanding that Gentile converts keep every practice of the Mosaic law, Paul asserted that this was the implication of their teaching. Since circumcision marked one as a Jew, this made one submitting to the rite *"is obligated to obey the whole law"* (v. 3). Of course, one cannot *"obey the whole law."* Other than Jesus Christ, no one has ever perfectly obeyed the law. Even if we could keep most of the law, we are still sinners, *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."* (Jas. 2:10).

2. If the Galatians accepted circumcision, what would they become debtors to (vs. 2,3)?

Many people try to add various moral requirements and even political requirements to one's Christian life. We need to be careful that we do not identify a specific political view as being "the Christian view," or that we confuse an outward morality with an inward spirituality. When we reduce Christianity to a formula such as, "I don't smoke or drink or cuss or chew," we run the risk of robbing God's grace of its power and replacing it with a salvation by works (see Q&A #4).

3. Few Christians today wrestle with the theology of circumcision, but are there areas in our lives today that may have the moral equivalence of circumcision? Are there aspects of the law that draw us despite our acceptance of God's grace?

If we could be "justified by the law" (an impossibility), Christ would "become of no effect" to us. Paul was presenting two choices: trust Christ for salvation, or trust the law for salvation. To trust the law was to be "fallen from grace." "You cannot mix grace and Law. If you decide to live in the sphere of Law, then you cannot live in the sphere of grace" (Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, Victor).

Under the old covenant, the law revealed that man had "*come short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3:23). Under the new covenant, grace reveals that God offers salvation to all undeserving sinners.

At any point in our growth in Christ, we realize that we still fall short of all He wants us to be. We know that complete righteousness in Christ cannot be ours until we leave this world and go to be with Him for eternity. So we "*eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope*" (Galatians 5:5). Where do we get the stamina to wait? The Holy Spirit keeps us strong and focused.

This is a very different perspective from the works-oriented or law-oriented approach to salvation. Rather than seeing the Galatians fall from grace by depending on their own works, Paul would have them live by faith and wait for God's completion of His work in them. Consider Paul's words to the Philippian Christians and his confidence "that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

4. Could the Galatians (we) fall from grace (vs. 4,5)?

Paul has already made it quite clear that circumcision is worthless as a supposed "supplement" to the gospel of grace.

Jews might continue to practice circumcision and Gentiles might continue to refuse to practice circumcision, as a matter of personal choice. But with regard to salvation, neither circumcision ... nor uncircumcision has any value for those who are in Jesus Christ (v. 6). The practice does not make a person more or less acceptable to God. What does matter is that a person comes to Christ by faith and lives out his faith through love.

"Love does not add anything to faith; it gives it a place to operate" (The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary).

5. Was there any value in being circumcised (v. 6)? Explain.

Threat of False Teachers (Galatians 5:7-12)

Paul frequently uses athletic metaphors, referring especially to running and boxing (Acts 20:24; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:7). Here he says that the Galatians had started their race well, but someone had impeded their progress.

The picture Paul seems to be describing is one in which a runner jumps in and cuts off another runner or in some way impedes the progress of another runner. The Galatians had been making spiritual progress until the false teachers had arrived.

The Judaizers were attempting to keep the Galatians from obeying the truth of the gospel. We must do more than simply believing the truth of the gospel; we must "obey the truth" of the gospel.

Throughout the Scriptures, faith and obedience are linked. Those who have faith obey God. Those who obey God do so because they have faith (cf. Heb. 11).

"This persuasion" (Gal. 5:8) refers to the false teachers who were attempting to persuade the Galatians to accept

the law over the gospel. Paul was certain that this false teaching did not come from God, who had called them to salvation in the Lord Jesus (1:6).

6. "Who did hinder" the Galatians (vs. 7,8)?

"A little yeast works through the whole batch" (5:9) was a proverbial expression similar to our "One rotten apple spoils the whole bushel." How many people in Galatia were teaching or accepting the false gospel of the Judaizers is unknown; nevertheless, Paul realized that even a small amount of false teaching could easily spread and affect all the Christians in the province of Galatia.

Leaven is yeast, and those who bake bread know the ability of yeast to permeate a lump of dough. Jesus used leaven as a figure for the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:6), and Paul used leaven as a figure for the potential spread of immorality in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

7. What point was Paul making about leaven (v. 9)?

Paul had not given up on the Galatians. They had been genuinely converted to Christ, and Paul had confidence in them and in the Lord who was at work in their lives.

"That you will take no other view" (v. 10) seems to indicate Paul's confidence in their agreement with him in these matters. He knew that he had presented his arguments clearly and effectively. Now it was up to the Galatians to decide who they would listen to.

Since *"the one that is throwing you into confusion"* (v. 10) is singular, this might indicate that there was only one major false teacher spreading heresy among the churches of Galatia. Just one person preaching a false gospel can have tremendous influence over others, especially if the false teacher has a very charismatic and compelling personality. Such teachers are often followed by gullible individuals who are *"tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine"* (Eph. 4:14).

That this individual *"will have to pay the penalty"* (Gal. 5:10) indicates that Paul believed that the false teacher would be judged by God for leading people astray. The phrase *"whoever that may be"* leads us to believe that Paul did not know the identity of the person who was the chief propagator of this heresy.

8. Why was Paul persuaded that the Galatians would share his loyalty to Christ (v. 10)?

The statement *"If I am still preaching circumcision"* (v. 11) could be taken to mean that the Judaizers claimed that Paul himself preached circumcision as a necessary rite. They had misconstrued Paul's act of having Timothy circumcised as a matter of expediency (Acts 16:3). Paul could not be preaching both circumcision and the cross, for they are contradictory.

If he promoted the law, why did the Jews so vigorously oppose his ministry? The very fact that Paul was persecuted by his own countrymen in so many places should have settled the question about the fact that he was not a champion for the Mosaic law.

The *"offence of the cross"* had to do with the general attitude among Jews concerning a crucified Messiah. Their messianic expectation was one of a conquering king, not a suffering servant (Isa. 53). If we could be saved by keeping the law, Jesus would not have had to endure the pain and humiliation of a cruel Roman cross (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23-24).

"I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves" (Gal. 5:12) can be interpreted as meaning Paul's desire was to see them disfellowshipped. A more likely interpretation is that Paul was saying he wished that those who were troubling the believers would emasculate themselves. While this may sound crude, Paul saw the whole issue of circumcision as one that had the potential to destroy everything he preached under the banner of the gospel of God's grace.

9. What did Paul's enemies accuse him of? Why was the cross an offense to the Jews (vs. 11.12)?

Liberty to Love (Galatians 5:13-15)

Christians have been set free from the burden of the law. This, of course, does not give us permission to abuse our liberty in Christ. Such abuse could occur in two ways: by submitting to false doctrine or by submitting to evil, fleshly desires (vs. 19-21).

The word translated "occasion" (v. 13) referred to a military base of operations. Our freedom in Christ should not be a launching pad for sinful behavior. While the term "flesh" is used in a number of ways in the New Testament, it is often used of our sinful human desires. "The flesh wants freedom to express itself as it will. Christ has not called the believers for such a freedom" (Ridderbos, Galatians, Eerdmans).

Some, like the Judaizers, promoted legalism. Others, called libertines, promoted license-the attitude that anything goes. They were guilty of "*turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness*" (Jude 1:4). Neither approach is right. Instead, God's people should "*serve one another*" (Gal. 5:13; cf. Rom. 12:9). The flesh desires to use people; the Holy Spirit within us desires to serve people. Christian freedom means the freedom to live as our Creator intended us to live.

10. What did Paul mean when he said, "But do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh" (v. 13)?

When Paul stated that "*entire law is fulfilled*," he was declaring that the substance of the law with regard to human relations can be summarized by the command "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (cf. Mark 12:28-34).

If a man really loves his neighbor, he will not harm him, steal from him, lie to him, entice his wife away from him, or even desire to do any of these things.

As Christ taught in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), a neighbor is not limited to people who are geographically, racially, or socially near us. A neighbor is anyone in need. Love, which is the outworking of faith (Gal. 5:6), will always take us further than law (Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 13:8-10).

11. What one commandment fulfills the law? How is this so (v. 14)?

Verse 15 describes what happens when there is an absence of love and the desire to "*serve one another*" (v. 13). What a tragedy that alleged Christians should act this way-biting and devouring one another through petty squabbles, unkind words, and selfish attitudes! What a sad witness to an unsaved world! Sadly, some believers "bite and devour one another" and end up destroying the local church of which they are members. The building may remain, but the witness of that church in the community has been destroyed.

12. How can Christians bite, devour, and consume one another (v. 15)?

Conclusion

Get Out of the Pit

Several times in our studies from Galatians thus far, we have noted that there is something wrong with being set free and then going back into bondage. Today's lesson has emphasized that the new life of freedom in Christ carries responsibility, but it is a joyous responsibility.

Suppose that you risked life and limb to free someone from a deep pit. Would you feel gratified if the person jumped back into the pit? No, you would be outraged! All that effort and sacrifice for nothing! You would want the person you rescued to enjoy his freedom and use it wisely.

God has not freed us to return to a life of bondage or to waste the new life He has provided. Today's Scripture

challenges us to "stand fast" in the freedom we have been given. That's the best way to honor the One who set us free.

Prayer

Dear Father, help me to see my freedom in Christ not as an entitlement but as a gift. In appreciation, help me to use my gift wisely for my sake, for others' sake, but most of all for Your sake. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thoughts to Remember

-We are not free to sin, but we have become free to not sin.

-"You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving." True Christian love cannot hide itself. It sacrifices for others, it gives to others, it serves others, it encourages others.