

“For Freedom”

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 5:1-6; Jeremiah 9:17-26

If anything is worth fighting for it is freedom—especially Christian freedom. In defense of Christian liberty, Paul issues a stern warning to the Galatians. Anyone who seeks to be justified by obedience to the law of Moses, through receiving circumcision, through keeping of Jewish dietary laws, or observing the Jewish religious calendar will come under God’s curse and fall from grace. Those who seek to be justified by observing what Paul calls the “basic principles of the world,” place themselves in grave danger. In Galatians 5:1-6, Paul builds his case against the Judaizers, contrasting their campaign of enslavement to the law with Christian liberty in Christ.

In the first four chapters of Galatians, Paul raised a number of doctrinal matters. Beginning in chapter 5, we move into what many identify as the “practical section” of this letter, taking up first the important matter of Christian liberty. While Paul changes focus a bit from doctrine to practice (the application of doctrine to specific situations), the apostle continues to set out clear contrasts between opposing positions. Paul is quite fond of antithesis (contrast) as a rhetorical critique and he uses it repeatedly.

Following up his analogy between Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-4:31, when Paul turned the Jewish understanding of redemptive history on its head, in Galatians 5:1-6, he contrasts faith and works yet again, showing how opposed they are when it comes to the justification of sinners. To seek to be justified by good works and human merit is to desire theological slavery. This is a very serious error since Jesus Christ came for the purpose of setting us free from bondage to sin and the law. In verse 1 of chapter 5 Paul begins with the assertion, “*for freedom Christ has set us free.*” This is where the Christian life begins. We will spend our time fleshing out the meaning of this important assertion in some detail.

If obeying the law of Moses as a means of justification is “bondage,” because doing so places one under the law’s demand for perfect obedience thereby making one subject to the law’s curse upon violation of any of its commands, then, it is justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone that Paul has in mind when he speaks of freedom. To be justified (given a “right” standing before God) is to be free from the curse of the law because Christ became a “curse” for us (Gal 3:13). We are also freed from the yoke of slavery to which law-keeping subjects us. Jesus came to set us free, not enslave us to the law. All of the Protestant Reformers agreed upon this point and its importance. To speak about justification was not enough. If Christian liberty was not the defining characteristic of the Christian life, then the doctrine of justification was not clearly understood.

It is highly likely that the Judaizers were asking their converts to take upon themselves the “yoke of the law of Moses” as a means of demonstrating their full commitment to the religion of Israel. It is also likely that Paul is throwing their own words back at them, calling obedience to law as a means of justification, a yoke of slavery when, in the second half of verse 1, he commands the Galatians “*stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” The Rabbinic description of the law as a yoke which the children of Abraham must take upon themselves, may also be behind the meaning of our Lord’s words of comfort in Matthew 11:30—“*my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” The freedom of which Paul is speaking is “the freedom belonging to the heir, the natural son, the child of the free

woman,”¹ which Paul just set out in the analogy of the preceding verses in which Paul took the proof-texts the Judaizers were using regarding the Abraham story, and showed that these texts actually support Paul’s doctrine of justification.

What, then, *is* Christian freedom? John Calvin contends that Christian liberty consists of three things: First, our consciences are clean before God, because we are exonerated from the guilt of all of our sins. The blood of Jesus Christ has washed them away. Second, since we are not bound to the law as a means of justification, we are, for the first time free to obey the law since it no longer condemns us. Third, since we free from slavery and now free to obey the law, this means that we are also free from things “indifferent,” or the so-called *adiaphora*. As Calvin puts it, “we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using [things indifferent] and other times not using them, indifferently” (III.xix.1-7).

Essentially then, Christian freedom is freedom from law as a means of justification. This entails freedom from the curse of law and the yoke of slavery brought about by human attempts to earn God’s favor through works-righteousness. If we are free in Christ, then anyone who attempts to bind our consciences to the law as a means of justification, or to the rules of men as a means or proof of our justification, are echoing the Judaizers. In doing so, they risk coming under God’s curse. Christian freedom arises because our consciences are clean before God because Christ has died to remove the guilt of our sin for all of our infractions of God’s law. Christian freedom also includes the new desire and ability to obey God’s law as the fruit of gratitude (the so-called “third use” of the law), knowing that God accepts our flawed efforts at obedience as good works, since we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Since we are free from law as a means of justification, we are now free to obey the law out of gratitude since we know this pleases God, and that these efforts are the *effect* of our justification, not the *basis*.

In verse 1, Paul uses both an indicative mood, which is a statement of fact (“*For freedom Christ has set us free*”) and an imperative, a command (“*stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*”). This indicative-imperative framework is essential for understanding Paul’s letters. Paul’s commands for Christians to act in a certain manner, always follows a declaration about what the Christian is in Jesus Christ. Christians are to act in a certain way, not to become Christians or to remain Christians, but because we are Christians! Here, “the indicative states that Christ has set believers free with the gift of freedom that is proffered in the gospel; the imperative imposes upon them the task of preserving that freedom or rather of continuing in that freedom.”²

It is a simple fact (the indicative) that we are free in Christ in all three senses we have just described. We are free from guilt, free from law as a means of justification, and free from those who try and enslave our consciences to the “basic principles,” such as do not taste, do not touch, and do not handle. “*For freedom Christ has set us free*” Our response to this (the imperative) is to defend that liberty against all efforts to return to slavery. “*Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” It is our Christian duty to love our weaker brothers and sisters and give up our freedom when necessary in their presence, as Paul describes in Romans 14. But, as Paul commands us, it is also our duty as Christians to fight Judaizers with everything in us, rather than surrender our liberty to them.

¹ Fung, Galatians, 216.

² Fung, Galatians, 217.

The importance of Christian liberty for Paul is seen in verse 2, where Paul uses the rather terse phrase, “*Look: I, Paul, say to you,*” which is emphatic, emphasizing Paul’s authority as apostle to the Gentiles to issue commands to the churches. Paul makes three strong assertions in the following verses (2-4). The first assertion is found in the second half of verse 2: “*if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.*” Paul is issuing a solemn warning to any Galatians who may be sitting on the fence, considering whether or not to submit to circumcision. If you listen to the Judaizers and are circumcised with the intention of being justified before God, the death of Christ will be of no value to you. Christ’s gracious act of becoming a “curse” upon the cross will not avail, and you will bear the curse of the law yourself. While hinted at in Galatians 2:3—where Paul mentions that Titus refused to be circumcised for this very reason—this is the first actual statement in the epistle that circumcision was the real issue dividing the Galatian church. Paul’s warning also echoes Old Testament warnings such as Jeremiah 9:17-26 (our Old Testament lesson), where YHWH warned Israel of the consequences of allowing circumcision to become a mere religious ritual, done apart from faith in God’s promise.

As Paul made clear in Galatians 3:1-5, Christ’s saving benefits are received through faith alone. One stays in Christ through faith alone as well. We begin the Christian life in the Spirit through the hearing of faith, and then continue in Christ through faith and the power of the Spirit. To attempt to be right before God through submission to ritual circumcision (specifically) or through law keeping (generally) is to deny that we are under God’s curse because of our disobedience. It is also to deny that Christ’s death alone is efficacious to remove curse that we receive for our own violations of the law. To argue that we are justified by faith *and* works, as the Judaizers were doing, is depreciate the grace of God as demonstrated in the death of Christ for sinners. As Charles Spurgeon once said, “*he who has a weak view of sin, has a weak view of the savior.*” If you don’t realize that the law brings a curse and that its demands must be fulfilled, perfectly, you will not see Christ’s death and imputed righteousness as the only solution to the human predicament.

Paul’s second assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 3. “*I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*” Paul is not condemning everyone who has already been circumcised (i.e., Jewish converts to Christianity), rather he is warning those who seek to be circumcised *in order to be justified*, to think very carefully about the consequences of such an act. All Jewish men were already circumcised. Paul is not condemning them, or Gentiles who may do so for other reasons (such as cleanliness). But he is warning Gentile converts that to be circumcised with the thought that doing so is meritorious before God is a dangerous thing to do.³

Paul is perfectly clear: either you are saved by the death of Christ, or you are not saved at all. If anyone in the Galatian churches argues that they are saved by Christ *plus* something they do (in this case, circumcision, keeping the dietary laws, and following the Jewish religious calendar), they are placing themselves back under law which, in turn, requires perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed. If we do not have Christ’s perfect righteousness reckoned to our account (received through faith alone) we cannot possibly stand in the judgement. The bottom line is if you want to be justified by your own efforts, you must have absolutely no sin and a record of perfect obedience, or you will be condemned.

The third assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 4 and has two parts. For those of “*you who would be justified by the law*” two things will happen. First, “*you are severed from Christ.*” Second, “*you have fallen away from grace.*” This verse is often cited to contend that a genuine

³ Fung, Galatians, 222.

Christian believer can be severed from Christ and lose their salvation, a very important and hotly debated point. Who is it that Paul has in view here as the one who can be severed from Christ and fall from grace? Is this a purely hypothetical situation, or if not, who is it that actually falls away?

A number have argued that this is indeed a reference to someone who is a Christian, and who then falls away. The Roman Catholic position as set forth in the Council of Trent is that to assume that someone who is presently a Christian cannot fall away in the future destroys all incentive to perform good works. According to Rome, no one can know that they are presently saved, unless God grants knowledge of this by special revelation. Rome contends that certain mortal sins can sever us from Christ and that assurance of salvation is a false and sinful presumption. We are restored through penance (a sacrament according to Rome), called a second plank after the shipwreck of lost grace. This means that we can be in the covenant, and then out, and then back in again—an idea foreign to the New Testament. Hebrews 6:1-6, the biblical text most often cited in this debate, speaks of apostasy as total and final.

Arminians (semi-Pelagians) put the matter a bit differently, focusing not upon particular sins which can sever us from Christ, but upon the use of our “free will.” Since we believe in Christ by an act of the will, we can decide to cease believing by an act of will and, therefore, subsequently sever ourselves from Christ and fall away. According to a leading Arminian theologian, “faith is conditional to the keeping [our being kept in salvation by God]; and as it involves a free personal agency there is no doctrine of absolute perseverance....A righteous man may turn to sin, and die therein. The branch may perish from the living vine. Judas, one of those given to the Son, was lost. St. Paul, even with his full assurance of a state of salvation apprehended the possibility of his own apostasy, and strenuously wrought against it (citing 1 Corinthians 9:27, “*I might be disqualified for the prize*”).”⁴

Is the person spoken of by Paul in Galatians 5, and who is severed from Christ a genuine Christian who has committed a so-called “mortal sin” (not a likely scenario given Paul’s doctrine of justification) or a Christian who through the exercise of their free will (much more likely in the context) turning from Christ alone back to the elementary principles, who has, therefore, apostatized?

To begin with, there is no doubt that Paul is very serious here. This is not a thinly-veiled warning, but a real possibility. There are apparently people in the Galatian church who have fallen from grace, and there are others who are considering circumcision. But are these people who turn from Christ truly Christians? Paul argues “no.” These are not elect Christians, but are instead baptized members of the visible covenant community (the church), who do not trust in Jesus Christ for justification, and who secretly trust in their own righteousness, even though they profess faith in Christ alone with their mouths. Such people are members of the visible church (the covenant community) through baptism and the external profession of faith. But they never truly exercise saving faith, do not persevere, and eventually fall away. They are therefore, not among the elect. Professing Christians can and do fall away from the church (the covenant community). Believing Christians numbered among God’s elect cannot.

This can be argued on three grounds: (1) The historical context with the Galatian church, and (2) the analogy of Scripture wherein we look at other Pauline texts, and (3) Paul’s treatment of national Israel and true Israel in Romans 9-11. First, when we look at the Galatian context, Paul has already spoken of those who have deserted Christ and the gospel (Galatians 1:6: “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ*”). Some have already fallen away. Paul is writing to

⁴ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, 268-69.

warn Christians not to follow them. But who heeds the warnings? Those whom God has called!

This leads to a second point, other Pauline passages which speak to the question of apostasy. Since it is God who graciously calls sinners to faith in Christ, how can he “uncall” them, or let them “uncall” themselves, since the Scripture says God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable—Romans 11:29? In Galatians 5:10, Paul speaks of his confidence in God, that his hearers will not accept a false gospel. He is confident that God will prevent his “brothers” from falling into such a fatal error. The warning is certainly real, but the question is, who heeds the warning? Those called (the elect) heed the warning.

We know from numerous texts that Paul did not believe that a Christian could lose present justification and salvation from future judgment. Romans 8:28-30, Paul speaks of an unbreakable chain of salvation; those whom God has chosen, he calls, those whom he calls he also justifies, those whom he justifies, he also glorifies. In fact, the rest of the 8th chapter of Romans is devoted to God’s faithfulness, in that those God has justified he will not condemn. What can separate us from his love? In Philippians 1, Paul states that the one who begins a good work in us will see it through to completion (1:6), and in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul speaks of those whom God has predestined coming to faith in Christ, and being sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption. In Ephesians 2:6, Paul speaks of the believer as already “raised with Christ” and already “seated in the heavenlies.” How is it that God can see us already in the heavenlies when we may not persevere? How can we become “unsealed?” Or “unseated?”

As to the third point, in Romans 9-11, Paul distinguishes between national (or ethnic) Israel, the visible covenant people of God and “true Israel” (Romans 9:6). Israel as a nation, nor the Jews as a people obtained the promises, but the elect within the nation of Israel did (Romans 11:7). There are interesting parallels with what is discussed here. The nation of Israel had both elect and reprobate within it. The elect received the promise. The non-elect did not. So it is with the Galatian church. The elect whom God has called, will receive the promise that God gave to Abraham through faith. Those who are not elect, who do not trust in Jesus Christ, though they profess to do so, can and do fall away from grace.

The bottom line is the warnings Paul makes are real and must be heeded. Those who return to law-keeping will fall from grace. The elect will heed these warnings, reject such heinous false teaching, and will continue to believe in Christ until the very end of their lives. They will persevere to the end and be saved. They do this because Jesus ensures that they do persevere! Paul places assurance and perseverance in the realm of Jesus Christ following through on what he began, and never relenting in the process. The Roman notion that we can sin our way out of Christ is a grievous error denying that Christ’s cross is sufficient to save sinners. The Arminian idea is equally false. When it is argued that *if* we can use our free-will to get ourselves in, we can use it to get ourselves out, we reject to notion of total depravity, since God “got us in” as an act of pure grace. This also denies God’s faithfulness in ensuring that those called to faith continue to believe. God doesn’t let us get away.

Paul makes several important points in verse 5, which support his rather stark contrast in verses 2-4. “*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*” Once again Paul broaches the eschatological (future) hope of righteousness, when he states that “through the Spirit by faith,” we await “the hope of righteousness,” which raises the question as to whether or not justification is present or in some sense a strictly future event. The phrase translated “the hope of righteousness,” refers to realization of all the blessings promised by God to those presently justified. By faith and through the power of the Holy Spirit, those who presently believe the promise, will receive all

those things promised to the children of Abraham, i.e., life, salvation, and glory.⁵ Notice too, that this is something obedience to the law can never bring about.⁶ Paul's emphasis is *not* solely upon a righteousness which we will receive but don't yet have. Throughout Galatians, Paul has spoken of justification as something Christians *already* possess (Galatians 3:1-9). This is the basis of our only comfort in life or in death! Those justified do possess the present hope that they will be delivered from God's future judgement, as well as receive all those good things promised to them.

In Galatians 5, Paul probably has the comments he made in Galatians 3:1-9 in mind. When Paul speaks of this hope being "through the Spirit" (perhaps a contrast with "the flesh"), and that we receive it through faith alone (in contrast to "works") he is telling us (by implication) that the hope of the righteous is markedly different from those who can only hope in the righteousness of circumcision and ceremony, which, in effect, leaves them with no hope. They trust in the flesh and in works. They can only look forward to the punishment they earn for themselves (the curse) under of the law.

Second, the statement in verse 6, explains why it is through the Spirit by faith that the justified have such hope. "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*" As we have seen in verse 2, circumcision and/or obedience to law have no place in our justification, but Paul expands the reference to include uncircumcision as well. Circumcision does not justify, and the lack of circumcision provides no advantage to the Gentile. What matters is faith, which links us to Christ, who's death removes the curse since he bore it for us in his own body, and who's active obedience is imputed to us through that same faith. What counts then, is faith working through love, a most disputed phrase. What does Paul mean by this?

True faith (which justifies) reveals itself in love for others. Are we justified by our love for others? No. But once we are justified by trusting in God's promises, we will begin to love our neighbor. Rome's notion that faith is manifest in a perfect love which leads to justification (i.e., we are justified if we love our neighbor sufficiently) is wrong. Faith is not equated with love, but that faith which looks to Christ will be evident in love for others. Paul is "not to be understood in a synergistic sense, as though faith through its expression cooperates in producing salvation."⁷ Rather, Paul is saying that the faith which justifies is of such a nature that it expresses itself through love of neighbor. The same act of faith which justifies also marks the beginning of the process of sanctification. When we are justified through faith alone, we also receive the Holy Spirit who begins to transform us, thereby enabling us to love others.

The Roman church argues that this passage refutes *sola fide*, since Paul supposedly teaches that faith is in actually a kind of "working in love." The Roman error is believing that our justification depends upon an inner transformation, seen in "faith working in and through love." Instead, the faith which justifies and unites us to Christ, will also issue forth in good works; in other words, a "faith which justifies and produces love." In saying this we must be clear that Paul is not talking about a faith which produces enough love and works of charity to earn justification. Ironically, the position of Tridentine Roman Catholicism is virtually identical to that of the Judaizers, then terrorizing the consciences of the Galatian churches. Both Luther and Calvin were absolutely justified, [pun intended] in making this connection.

⁵ Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 226.

⁶ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 231-232.

⁷ See Fung, Galatians, 229-230. Fung is citing (in part) from Gunther Bornkamm, Paul, 153.

The Roman church at the Council of Trent anathematized Luther and Calvin—but they actually anathematized Paul’s gospel, and from that point on ceased to be a true and visible church.

If Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life is the application of his doctrine to particular situations, then, the implications of Christian liberty are for us as a church quite obvious. *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* When Roman Catholic apologists spy on our liberty, telling us that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone is an invention of Luther and Calvin, we must stand firmly against them. We must rebuke them from the Scriptures and remind them of Paul’s words in Galatians 2:16, *“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”* It is for freedom, not slavery to Popes, Cardinals, and Canon Law, that Christ set us free! Stand firm and never again become subject to the Roman yoke of slavery.

When so-called bothers and sisters spy on our liberty and tell us that since we can fall away from Christ and be lost, or that we get in by grace but stay in through good works, or that we had better prove our allegiance to God and find the assurance of our salvation through our good works, instead, we reply *“Christ loved me and gave himself for me!”* (2:20). Jesus Christ became a curse for me, so that even though I was a prisoner to sin, I am now set free! Jesus’ death is sufficient for me and my only hope of heaven is not to be found in the work of my hands, but in his cross and sinless life! It is for freedom that Christ set us free! Stand up to them! Don’t give in to those who teach such things, even for a minute!

Beloved this is Paul’s message for us today. First, Christ died to set us free. He has died for the guilt of our sins. If we trust in him, we are free from sin’s guilt and power. Second, Christ has died because we cannot be justified by obedience to the law. If we trust in him (through the “hearing with faith”), we are free from the law as a means of justification. Third, Christ has died for our sins, and so we are free from those basic principles which once enslaved us. We never again need to submit to those who tell us, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!

When Paul asks “why did Christ die?” his answer is a resounding *“for freedom!”* If the son of man sets you free, you will be free indeed! Stand firm then, and never again take upon yourselves the yoke of slavery.