

“It Is for Freedom”

Text: Galatians 5:1-6

Anyone who seeks to be justified by obedience to the law of Moses, through ritual circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws and observing the Jewish religious calendar, comes under God’s curse. Paul has called these things the “basic principles of the world.” Those who seek to be justified by observing them are in slavery. Here in Galatians 5:1 ff., Paul now takes up the subject of Christian liberty.

Paul moves from the doctrinal section of the epistle to the so-called “practical section,” which begins with an important discussion of Christian liberty. While the focus now changes a bit from doctrine to practice (Paul’s application of doctrine to specific situations) it is Paul’s habit to continue setting out clear contrasts between opposing positions. As we have seen, Paul is quite fond of antithesis as a rhetorical critique and he uses it repeatedly.

Following up the analogy between Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-4:31, here in Galatians 5:1-6, Paul sets out a contrast between faith and works, showing how completely antithetical they are when it comes to the matter of justification. To seek to be justified by good works and human merit is theological slavery. This is an especially serious error since Jesus Christ came for the purpose of setting us free. For Paul, it is this great truth that begins his discussion of the Christian life. “*It is for freedom that Christ set us free.*”

In the first six verses of Galatians 5, Paul makes several very remarkable statements.

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.

The first of these rather remarkable comments is found in Galatians 5:1— “*It is for freedom that Christ set us free.*” We would be horribly amiss if we did not spend some time fleshing out the meaning of this assertion in some detail. If obeying law as a means of justification is “bondage,” and places one under the law’s demand for perfect obedience, thereby making one subject to the law’s curse upon any 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 view when he speaks of freedom. To be justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone is to be free. We are free not only from the curse of the law (since Christ became a “curse” for us) but also free from the yoke of slavery to which law-keeping subjects us. Christ came for the purpose of setting us free. He did not come to make us slaves. The Reformers were all agreed upon this. To speak about justification was not enough. If Christian liberty as a characteristic of the Christian life did not immediately follow, justification was not clearly understood.

It is quite possible that the Judaizers were actually asking their converts to take upon themselves the yoke

of the law of Moses as a means of demonstrating their full commitment to the faith of the fathers. Hence, Paul throws their own words back at them, calling obedience to law as a means of justification, a yoke of slavery. This Rabbinic view of the law as a yoke that 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 had just set out in the analogy of the preceding verses in which Paul had taken the proof-texts the Judaizers were using, and demonstrated that these texts actually support Paul's doctrine of justification.

What, then, *is* Christian freedom? Calvin argues 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 are 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).

This is the same point Paul is making here. If we are free in Christ, then anyone who attempts to bind our consciences either to the law as a means of justification, or to the rules of men as a means or proof of our justification, are doing the work of a Judaizer and risks coming under God's curse.

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 that human attempts to earn God's favor through works-righteousness bring about. Christian freedom means that our consciences are clean before God because Christ has died to remove the guilt of our sin for all of our many infractions of the law. Christian freedom 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 that this pleases God and that these efforts are the effect of our justification, not the cause.

In verse 1, Paul uses both an indicative mood, which is simply a statement of fact, and an imperative, which is a command. 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. In other words, Christians are to act in a certain way, not to become Christians or remain Christians, but because they are Christians! Here, in Galatians 5 "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

Therefore, it is simply a matter of 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

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 216.

² Fung, *Galatians*, p. 217.

who try and enslave our consciences to the “basic principles,” such as do not taste, do not touch and do not handle. “*It is for freedom that Christ set us free.*” Our response to this—the imperative—is to defend that liberty against all efforts at legalism— “*Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*” It is our Christian duty to love the weaker brother and give up our freedom when necessary in their presence, as Paul describes in Romans 14. But it is our duty as Christians to fight the legalist to the death rather than surrender our liberty to them.

The importance of Christian liberty for Paul is seen in verse 2, where Paul uses the rather terse phrase, “*Mark my words!*” which is a very emphatic construction, describing and emphasizing Paul’s authority as apostle to the Gentiles. Paul makes his point with three strong assertions in the following verses (2-4). The first assertion is found in the second half of verse 2: “*If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.*” In the context of this letter, Paul is issuing a very solemn warning to any Galatian Christians who may be sitting on the fence, considering whether or not to submit to circumcision. Paul’s point is that if any Galatians listen to the Judaizers and are, therefore, circumcised with the intention of being justified before God as a result, the death of Christ will be of no value to them. Christ’s gracious act of becoming a “curse” upon the cross will not avail for you, 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.

As Paul has made clear in Galatians 3:1-5, Christ’s saving benefits are received through faith alone and one stays in Christ through faith alone as well. One begins the Christian life in the Spirit through the hearing of faith, and one continues in the Christ through faith and the power of the Spirit as well. To attempt, then, to be right before God through submission to ritual circumcision (specifically) or through law keeping (generally) amounts to a denial that we are under God’s curse through our disobedience and 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 a denial of human depravity and original sin, as well as a depreciation of 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.

The second assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 3. “*Every man who lets himself be circumcised is obligated to obey the whole law.*” Paul is not here condemning everyone who has already been circumcised, rather he is warning those who might seek circumcision in order to be justified, to think very carefully about the consequences of such an act. One noted authority on Galatians summarizes the issue here:

The present tense of ‘receives circumcision’...shows that Paul has in view not the Jewish Christian who was circumcised, but any and every Gentile Christian who would receive circumcision as a legal obligation necessary for salvation....In pointing out that to let oneself be circumcised is to commit oneself to observing the entire law, Paul may have been hammering home the logical implications of circumcision of which they had been fully informed by the agitators but had not taken sufficient account.³

³ Fung, Galatians, p. 222.

Paul is perfectly clear: either you are saved by the death of Christ, or you are not saved at all. For if anyone in the Galatian churches argues that they are saved by Christ *plus* something else (in this case, circumcision, keeping the dietary laws and following the Jewish religious calendar), they are placing themselves under law which in turn requires perfect and total obedience in thought, word and deed. If we do not have Christ's perfect righteousness reckoned to our account (which is received through faith alone) we cannot 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 else you will be condemned. Here again, Paul is reminding the Judaizers, "if you want law, I'll give you law."

The third assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 4 and has two parts. "*If you try to be justified by law*" two things will happen. First, you will be severed from Christ and cut off from him. Second, you will fall from grace. For Paul, our salvation is all of grace through the merits of Christ, or we have no hope of salvation at all. This text has been used, of course, to argue that a Christian believer can be severed from Christ and lose their salvation. The whole discussion of whether or not a Christian can lose their justification is an important one. 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 pure 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 view 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 is nothing but a rash presumption and destroys all incentive to perform good works. According to Rome, no one can know that there are presently saved, unless God grants it to them by special revelation. Indeed, Rome argues that certain mortal sins can sever us from Christ and that assurance of salvation is utter presumption. We are restored through a purely fictional sacrament, penance, 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 repeatedly—a concept totally foreign to the New Testament. Hebrews 6:1-6, the text most often cited in this regard, speaks of apostasy as total and final. If you fall away, you cannot come back!

The Arminians 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" in which case since we believe in Christ by an act of the will, we can supposedly decide to cease believing 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

Thus, is the person described in Galatians 5 who is severed from Christ a Christian who has committed a so-called "mortal sin" (in the Roman conception, 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?

First, there is no doubt that Paul is very serious here. This is not a thinly-veiled warning, but a real

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

possibility. There are apparently people in the Galatian church who have done this, and there are others who are actually considering doing it. Are these people who turn from Christ actually Christians, however? Paul argues “no.” These are not elect Christians but are instead baptized members of the visible covenant community (the church) but who in reality 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 they fall away. They are therefore, not among the elect. Professing Christians can and do fall away. Believing Christians numbered among God’s elect cannot.

This can be argued on three fronts: (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.

When we look at the Galatian context it is clear that 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 the one who called you”*). Clearly some have already done this. But Paul is writing to warn Christians not to follow them. Who heeds the warnings? Those whom God has called! Since it is God who graciously calls sinners to faith in Christ, how can he now “uncall” them or let them “uncall” themselves, since the Scripture says God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable—Romans 11:29? Paul places his confidence in God (5:10), that his hearers will not adopt the false gospel. He is confident that God will prevent his “brothers” from falling into such a fatal error. Thus the warning is certainly real, but the question is, who heeds the warning?

We know from numerous other texts that Paul did not believe that a Christian could lose present justification and salvation from future judgement. Romans 8:28-30, clearly 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. How can we now become “unsealed?” 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? The evidence is simply overwhelming on this point.

In Romans 9-11, Paul distinguishes between national (or ethnic) Israel, the visible covenant people of God and “true Israel” (Romans 9:6). For Israel as a nation, or the Jews as a people, did not obtain 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. 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 do indeed fall from grace. There is no support for the idea of “once saved always saved,” in the sense that once we believe we are born again and need not persevere in the faith as many evangelicals argue. The elect however, will heed the warnings, and 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 God ensures that they do persevere! Paul everywhere places assurance and perseverance in the realm of God 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 for this denies that Christ's cross is sufficient to save sinners. The Arminian idea is equally false. For 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 must reject total depravity—since God “got us in” as an act of pure grace—as well as God's faithfulness in ensuring that those called to faith continue to believe. Paul is clear that God doesn't let us get away.

Paul makes two very important points in verse 5, which support his rather stark contrast in verses 2-4. First, Paul broaches yet again the eschatological hope of righteousness, literally “through the Spirit by faith,” we await “the hope of righteousness,” which has raised the question as to whether or not justification is present or in some sense a future event. There are a number of issues here which need to be discussed. The phrase which in the NIV is translated as “the righteousness for which we hope” should probably be rendered, “the hope of righteousness,” referring 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 the law can never bring about.⁶ Thus Paul's emphasis is *not* solely upon a righteousness which we will receive but don't yet have, as the NIV seems to indicate. Indeed, throughout Galatians, Paul has spoken of justification as something Christians *already* possess (Galatians 3:1-9). This is our only comfort in life or in death! Thus the justified have the hope that they will be delivered from God's future judgement, as well as receiving all those good things promised to them.

In Galatians 5, Paul probably has the comments he made in Galatians 3:1-5 in mind here. It is important to note that 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 deserve under the curse of the law.

Second, the statement in verse 6, explains why it is through the Spirit by faith that the justified have such hope. As we have seen in verse 2, circumcision and/or obedience to law have no place in justification, but now Paul expands the reference here to include uncircumcision as well. Circumcision does not justify and the lack of circumcision provides no advantage to the Gentile. What matters here 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? According to one writer,

the faith which operates through love is clearly the same as the faith which justifies. Does this suggest that love [charity] plays a contributory role in justification? [No]....We must guard against the misunderstanding current especially in Catholic theology (though Protestantism is far from exempt) that only faith made perfect in love leads to justification [that is on the Roman

⁵ Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, pp. 226-226;

⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, pp. 231-232.

scheme faith and works done in love]. This represents a serious distortion of the relationship between faith, love, and justification. In speaking of justification, Paul never talks of faith and love, but only of faith as receiving. Love is not therefore an additional prerequisite for receiving salvation, nor is it properly an essential trait of faith; on the contrary, faith animates the love in which it works.⁷

Paul's words, then, are "not to be understood in a synergistic sense, as though faith through its expression cooperates in producing salvation." Rather, Paul is saying simply that the faith which justifies is of such a nature that it expresses itself through love. It should also be pointed out that 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.

Let us not make the mistake of believing that our justification depends upon the inner transformation, this "faith working in and through love." But that faith which justifies and unites us to Christ, will also issue forth in good works, in other words, a "faith that works in 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. The Roman church argues that this passage utterly refutes *sola fide*, since Paul supposedly teaches that faith is in actuality a kind of "working in love." But it is clear that 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. The Roman church at the Council of Trent, in effect, did not anathematize Luther and Calvin—they 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 simply the application of his doctrine to particular situations, then, the implications of Christian liberty are for us as a church, quite obvious. *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!* When Roman Catholic apologists come and 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 firm against them. We must rebuke them from the Scriptures and remind them of Paul's words in Galatians 2:16, "*we are justified through faith in Christ and not by observing the law.*" 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 a yoke of slavery.

When so-called evangelicals come and spy on our liberty and tell us that since we can fall away from Christ and be lost, that we had better prove our allegiance to God and find the assurance of our salvation through our good works, instead, we must say "*Christ loved me and gave himself for me!*" Jesus Christ became a curse for me, so that even though I was a prisoner to sin, am now set free! His 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 our sins. Second, Christ has died because we cannot be justified by obedience to the law. If we trust in him, 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

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

us.” We never again need to submit to those who tell us, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!

Why did Christ die? *“It is for freedom!”* For if the son of man sets you free, you will be free indeed!