

“The Offense of the Cross Has Been Abolished”

Text: Galatians 5:7-15

Since it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in the face of those who would seek to re-enslave them to the basic principles of the world. For Paul the choice is clear. Either we place our trust in the cross of Jesus Christ—though it be a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek—or else we fall prey to the Judaizers who would abolish the offense of the cross in order to preach a false gospel of human merit, but which is a message that tickles ears and pleases audiences.

Beginning in Galatians 5:1, our focus moves to the so-called practical section of the epistle. As we have seen, Paul begins his discussion of the Christian life with a remarkable assertion—the very purpose of the death of Christ was to set believers free from the elementary principles of the world. Thus our liberty in Christ is the basis for the Christian life because, as Christians, we have clean consciences before God since our sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ. Since we are in Christ we are not bound by the Law as a means of earning a right standing with God. Therefore, we are free now to obey the Law of God since we are no longer slaves to sin. As Christians, we are not bound by the so-called “things indifferent,” that is, those things which are not expressly prohibited in Holy Scripture, summed up in the prohibitions, “do not taste,” “do not handle,” “do not touch” (cf. Colossians 2:20-23). Therefore, all those who have a right standing before God through faith in Christ are also free from the things which had formerly enslaved them. Unless we are clear about this, we will not be clear about the Christian life.

Given the fact that Christ died to set Christians free from the very things to which the Judaizers were trying to re-enslave them, Paul exhorts the Galatians, both at the beginning and end of this section, to stand firm against these false teachers, and to not allow themselves to once again become subject to the yoke of slavery. For if anyone does return to the Law as a means of earning favor with God, Paul says, they will fall from grace and be severed from Christ. This is no mere peripheral debate. For Paul, the gospel necessarily produces freedom in Christ. But the false gospel taught by the Judaizers brings about slavery and bondage to the very things for which Christ died to free us.

But Paul is no libertine as the Judaizers were certainly arguing. You can just hear them say, “Paul, if you teach that we are justified by faith alone and not by works, what place does that leave for us?” “If people really believe that, they will live lives characterized by sin, not good works.” You can imagine them telling everyone who would listen about those few who did indeed use the gospel as an excuse to sin—supposedly proof that such a gospel is dangerous. But Paul does not take the bait. Instead he champions the gospel of free grace, justification by faith alone and Christian liberty all the more. The problem is not that the gospel leads to license, but that those who live in such fashion do not understand or believe the gospel! Paul’s doctrine is that the faith which justifies, is also a faith which works in love—not to become justified—but because one is already justified. The one who trusts in the merits of Christ has been set free to obey the Law of God and embrace the truth of the gospel. But the religion of the Judaizers, on the other hand, is a religion of fear, doubt and slavery.

In Galatians 5:7, Paul continues his discussion of the Christian life and continues to flesh out some of the ramifications of Christian freedom. *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!

Following up on his earlier assertions in Galatians 5:1-6 that works of the Law cannot justify and that believers are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, Paul now makes another sharp distinction, this time between the cross of Christ and circumcision. This is a contrast between human merit based upon conformity to ritual and ceremony versus the saving merits of Jesus Christ. In Paul's mind, the offense of the cross of Jesus Christ is an important theme and is of profound significance not only for his own ministry, but characterizes the gospel itself.

Calling his readers back to the mind-set they had when he first preached the gospel to them, Paul reminds the Galatians that *"you were running a good race,"* but someone cut in on them—literally someone *"blocked the way,"* and kept the Galatians from *"obeying the truth."* Since Paul had previously spoken of the gospel as *"the truth"* in Galatians 2, he very likely means that by *"cutting in"* on the Galatians, the Judaizers had prevented many from believing the Gospel and obeying the central message of that gospel: which is that we must trust in Jesus Christ alone in order to be justified since the merits of Christ—including his death for our sins and his perfect obedience—are received through faith alone and not through works.

This deception does not come from God who called them to faith in Christ. The source of this hindrance must be found somewhere else. In the most obvious sense this deception comes directly from the Judaizers, who have already been severed from Christ and have fallen from grace. But Paul will later state that there are more sinister origins to such deceptive teaching. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says *"If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:3-5a)."*

In historic Protestant theology, the three great enemies facing the Christian are the world, the flesh and the devil. The world is understood to be those material enticements which draw us away from Christ and his kingdom—fame, fortune, and as Francis Schaeffer calls it—*"personal peace and affluency."* In this case, it is identifying with this present evil age which is passing away and from which Christ came to rescue us (Galatians 1:4). Following the way of the world would be akin to having no interest in thinking like a Christian about the issues of life, and intellectually identifying with the world in opposition to the Law and gospel. The religions of the world tell us that good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell, and the determining factor as to where one spends eternity lies not in the grace and will of God, but in the will and efforts of the sinner. As we have seen, this is what Paul calls the *"basic principles of the world"* and that which stands in opposition to his gospel.

The flesh, on the other hand, is the sinful nature which wages a constant and determined guerrilla war against us from within. The flesh—or the sinful orientation—produces those sinful and self-centered acts which condemn us when we are measured by the standard of God's law which demands perfect obedience in thought word and deed. Paul teaches us that the flesh is progressively subdued by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace—Word and Sacrament—over the course of our lives, though as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Q. 114, even the holiest in this life have only the smallest beginning of obedience required of them under the Law. We will wage war against the sinful nature until we die, or Christ comes back, which ever comes first.

The devil, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with disrupting the spread of the gospel and distorting the truth wherever and whenever possible. It is our Lord himself who spoke of Satan as the “father of lies.” The truth is not in him, and deceit and obfuscation of the truth is his native language (John 8:44-45). It is simply amazing that so many Christians act like the devil’s primary goal in life is to disrupt their every move. In many circles, anything that goes wrong is blamed on Satan. This is what happens when you have no doctrine of providence—the devil caused my computer to crash or gave me a flat tire so I’d be late to church. Our age is as wicked and superstitious an age, as was the first century world of Galatia. This is why Paul repeatedly warns us of the evils of false doctrine. Satan could care less about the condition of your hard-drive, but he hates the gospel of free grace and Christian liberty—a point which far too many Christians overlook.

In verse 9, Paul quotes a popular proverb—“*a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.*” The point is that a small amount of something as potent as yeast can spread throughout the whole mass quite quickly and innocently with dramatic consequences. In this case, the false teachings of the Judaizers can spread throughout the whole congregation in short order. The term “leaven”—very familiar to all who lived in the first century who virtually existed on baked bread—has a varied use in the New Testament. In Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21, our Lord used the term in reference to the Christian church in the parable of the leaven. But Paul may have our Lord’s words recorded in Luke 12:1 in mind here, where Jesus spoke of the “leaven” of the Pharisees as their “hypocrisy.” In Matthew 16:5-12, Jesus also speaks of the teaching of the Sadducees and Pharisees as leaven, and this is probably what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the teaching of the Judaizers as “leaven” spreading throughout the Galatian churches.

In case of his immediate hearers, Paul remains confident that they will not ultimately follow the Judaizers to the point of being severed from Christ and falling from grace, for God is faithful and he will preserve all of those in Christ, ensuring that they believe to the end and are saved. In verse 10, Paul declares, “*I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view,*” i.e., that they will take no other view than the fact that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, and that they will indeed stand firm as he has exhorted them—since the gospel itself is at stake.

It is probably important to recall that the same apostle who had pointed out that saving faith will inevitably work in love—not to earn justification, but as the fruit of the prior verdict of justification—also believed that “love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” as he stated in 1 Corinthians 13:7. Paul’s confidence is in Christ, who is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, who gives them eternal life, and who does not allow a single one of his own to be snatched from his hand (cf. John 10:1-31). Paul’s warnings to the Galatians are real, but the apostle’s confidence is in God’s gracious work in sustaining faith in those who trust the Savior.

In the latter part of verse 10, Paul seems to imply that the Judaizers were led by a specific, though unnamed individual—“*the one who is throwing you into confusion,*” and “*who will pay the penalty*” for what he has done. Paul is quite clear that the one doing this, whoever he may be, will receive God’s judgement. The phrase, “*whoever he may be,*” does not necessarily mean that Paul does not know his identity, but probably means that whoever it is teaching such things will receive judgement despite “a possible high standing in the church.”¹ Paul expresses a similar sentiment in 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, where he warns us that there are false apostles and deceitful workers within the church, who do indeed masquerade as angels of light. Paul is warning us of the inevitable fact that heretics will come—and we

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 238.

must be on guard for them because they will not come and say, “Hi!” “I am a heretic!” But false teachers will get “what their actions deserve,” says Paul, for no matter how deceptive they are, God knows those who are his and will protect them as the light of God’s word will expose their error.

In verse 11, Paul is responding to charges made against him by this unnamed accuser. “*Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?*” Though Paul would not permit Titus to be circumcised because the gospel was at stake in Galatia, under other circumstances Paul had Timothy circumcised so as not to be a source of controversy to the Jews who lived in Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:3). Apparently, the individual attacking Paul in Galatia was using this against him, in effect, accusing Paul of duplicity, i.e., Paul preached one gospel to Jews and another to Gentiles. But while Paul was willing to grant circumcision to the Jews, thereby allowing him to concentrate on the message of the cross, Paul himself could argue, if he was preaching two different gospels, and so taking the easy road, “*why am I still being persecuted?*” Paul was being persecuted because the cross of Jesus Christ was an offence to the self-righteous and they would do anything to abolish it.

Paul is perfectly clear that he preached the cross of Jesus Christ to both Jew and Gentile. While allowing Jews to continue with the custom of circumcision, he never preached that Jews were justified one way and Gentiles another! If he had indeed been preaching circumcision, why on earth was he being attacked so viciously? Ear-ticklers tell their audiences what they want to hear so as to avoid such persecution. The cross is as offensive to them as it is to their hearers. Preachers who preach a false gospel of self-esteem, works-righteousness, prosperity, or what the Reformers decried as “priestcraft and popery,” or who tell us that we must preach to the felt-needs of our congregations, may attract huge crowds and numerous disciples. They can do this only by abolishing the offence of the cross.

Since the cross is completely offensive to the self-righteous and those who seek to stand before God and boast of their own good works, and since nothing is clearer from the evidence that Paul had been preaching the cross through his public placarding of Christ crucified, it is only natural then, that persecution would arise. The fact that the Judaizers were attacking his character refuted the argument that Paul had “*been preaching circumcision.*” Thus, in Galatians 5:12, Paul once again demonstrates his utter indignation at the efforts of the false teachers and he minces no words with them. “*As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*” The NIV very accurately captures the graphic sense of the original language. These comments raise a number of important issues:

First, this verse is a clear indication that the inspiration of Scripture does not entail any form of mechanical dictation, but instead must be seen to be more of a divine-human confluence. While there is no doubt that the inspiration of Scripture extends to the very words of Scripture, and not just to the thoughts or ideas in Scripture, nevertheless, Paul’s own anger and personality is also clearly seen here in Galatians. The divine inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit does not negate its equally human properties, any more that Christ’s having a divine nature negates the fact that he was also truly human.

Second, there is an Old Testament echo here as well. In Deuteronomy 23:1, Moses wrote “*no one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.*” The background for this in the time of Moses was the widespread Near-Eastern practice of eunuchs serving as priests in the worship of the various pagan deities. Jumping ahead to first century Galatia and the case of those who circumcised themselves—not as sign and seal of righteousness as in the case of those Jewish Christians who were justified by faith alone—but in order to be justified, Paul’s warning is clear. If you start with circumcision, then go the whole way and emasculate yourself! In doing so, you thereby bar yourself

from the assembly of God's people. Paul is once again reminding the Galatians that if they seek to return to law as a means of justification, they should actually take the time to read what the Law says! For if they circumcise themselves to be justified, they come under God's curse and cannot enter into the assembly of God's people, namely Christ's church.

Thus Paul clearly shows the absolute superiority of the cross as the only way of righteousness, and that circumcision—while no doubt important and useful if seen correctly as a sign and seal of Christ's righteousness—could, in fact, become positively evil, in that one circumcised in an attempt to earn righteousness is severed from Christ and will suffer eternal loss. To abolish the offence of the cross is to abolish the gospel!

In verse 13, Paul yet again exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom, since it is for freedom that Christ has called them. But such freedom is not the same as license. *12 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Despite his anger, Paul refers to his readers once again as "brothers." As is his custom, Paul begins his argument with an indicative—that is, a statement of fact—which forcefully distinguishes genuine believers from the Judaizers and those influenced by them. "You," he says, "*were called to be free.*" The very reason that God had called the Galatian Christians to faith in Jesus Christ in the first place was to set them free from bondage to sin and to the yoke of the Law. Christ died for the express purpose of liberating his people from this two-fold tyranny of sin and law. In his death, Jesus Christ became a curse for us, and in doing so, takes away the guilt of our sins.

But the indicative declaration—you were called to be free—is followed by an imperative, "*But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature [flesh]; rather serve one another in love.*" There are several very important points to be made here. To begin with, the term "sinful nature," or the "flesh" has a very important role in Paul's understanding of sin and grace.

"Flesh" denotes not merely the bodily passions and lusts, nor even strictly speaking a "lower nature" contrasted with a "higher nature" in a person, but rather the human individual in his or her sin and depravity apart from the redeeming grace of God and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Thus this "sinful nature" (NIV) embraces "the desires of the body and mind" (Eph. 2:3 RSV) and produces "works of the flesh" which Paul is to list in vv 19-21. The word rendered [indulge, NIV] . . . is used in the military sense of a base of operations . . . Here the imagery suggested is of the "flesh" occupying the position of a malicious opponent and using "freedom" as a springboard for its activities. In other words, the warning is against using "freedom" as a pretext for indulging the sinful nature."²

Paul is very careful to point out that while Christian liberty is a necessary adjunct of the gospel, Christian liberty cannot be used as an excuse to justify sinful behavior.

As Paul sets this out, there is both a negative and positive element to the imperative—the negative is that we are not use our freedom in Christ as a pretense for sinning, and the positive command is that we are

² Fung, *Galatians*, p. 244.

“*serve one another in love.*” This certainly is a further elaboration of the Apostle’s previous comments about true faith being a faith which leads to works done in love (Galatians 5:6b). Christians, now free from the guilt and power of sin, are free to serve one another as Christ has served us (cf. John 13:2-12).

Some have noticed the paradoxical comments by Paul which seems to state that while we are free in Christ, we are now to be slaves to one another. The point is that we are free from the curse of the Law, and we are free from any requirement to earn justification through works. But the freedom that Christ has won for us is a freedom to serve. Since we do not perform our good works to be justified, but because we are justified, this enables believers to serve one another in love. Our neighbor may not be any more lovable than we are—that’s not the point—but because Christ has loved us and given himself for us, we now love one another out of a sense of gratitude for what Christ’s life and death has accomplished for all of us. In this sense the love that we are to have—each for the other—is a fruit of Christian liberty. Slaves cannot love their masters, and cruel masters make it difficult for their slaves to love anyone. But Christ is now our master, and since he is love incarnate, we as his people are now free to love one another, which is demonstrated in serving other justified sinners, that is, regarding the needs of others as of equal importance as our own needs.

In verse 14, Paul goes on to make the comment that “the entire law is summed up [literally ‘fulfilled’] in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a kind of theological short-hand wherein Paul is citing Leviticus 19:18b, and is, in effect, condensing the whole second table of the law—commandments 5-10—into one short command. As one writer reminds us,

Paul has repeatedly stated that believers are free from the law (cf. 4:31; 5:13) and has repeatedly appealed to the Galatians to preserve and enjoy this liberty and not to allow themselves to relapse into legal servitude (4:9-11; 5:1). Now, however, they are exhorted to serve one another through love, for in doing so they will satisfy the requirements of the law....In other words, the believer who is free from the law is at the same time one who fulfills the law; only the way he fulfills the law is not by punctiliously observing rules and regulations of an external code, but by the new way of love, which is generated within the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:6b).³

Therefore, according to the second use of the law, our own inability to love our neighbor as we ought actually condemns us and should drive us to the cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Not a person in the room has ever loved his neighbor as himself. But for the justified Christian, the Law—according to the third use—is indeed fulfilled since as free men and women we now serve one another in love, not to be justified, but because we are justified and all our works are acceptable to God, because they are covered with Christ’s glorious righteousness. For our good works are themselves the fruit of the blessed Holy Spirit, who inevitably brings forth his fruit in the lives of those who are justified—a point Paul will make in Galatians 5:22—and love for the brethren is at the top of the list of the Spirit’s fruit. In other words, the same faith through which we are justified is a faith through which the Holy Spirit produces good works as its fruit, and the fact that we are now free in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, means that this freedom will manifest itself in love for other justified sinners. We are free from the tyranny of sin and death, and now free to actually serve one another in love—not because we are worth loving—but because Christ has loved us, gave himself for us and now indwells us by his Holy Spirit.

³ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 247.

The practical situation which no doubt provoked his exhortation for us to serve one another in love and not indulge our sinful nature was that because of the controversy generated by the false teaching of the Judaizers, the Galatians were now devouring one another, as wild animals would do. This is why Paul speaks of the “leaven of the Judaizers” since their departure from the gospel has actually produced the condition of division and quarreling which destroys Christ’s Church. One again, the great irony is that those who are most zealous for the Law are often the ones who are least concerned about fulfilling it!

There is much here in Galatians 5:7 ff., that is important for us to consider. It is obvious by now that the Judaizers regarded the cross of Jesus Christ as an offence to their self-righteousness—an offence which must be abolished. This is because the cross is a graphic picture to us of the wisdom and power of God, and the only possible means by which our sins can be forgiven. But to those who do not know Jesus Christ and boast of their own good works the cross is a symbol of shame and embarrassment. It is an offence to them that must be abolished. For the cross reminds the self-righteous that all attempts at good works do not save but only condemn. The cross reminds us that God’s wrath and anger must be turned aside if sinners are to enter heaven. But the cross also means something else. For the cross is a picture of the love of God for a sinful and rebellious world. The agonizing death of the Savior reminds all of us of what it cost the Son of God to save us from the guilt of our sins and to satisfy the wrath of God. When we preach the cross by publically placarding Christ—a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Greek—the Scriptures plainly tell us that we will be persecuted and that many will have nothing to do with us. The cross represents the narrow way. For the cross bids us to come and die to self-righteousness and to seek the forgiveness and righteousness of another.

Thus there will always be the temptation to seek some other message, some other emphasis, something less offensive, something a bit more palatable. The wisdom and power of God is an embarrassment to many of the fallen children of Adam. Thus it was inevitable that the Judaizers would attack Paul’s gospel of Christ crucified. But when they did so, what was the result? The Judaizers made many converts and were successful from the perspective of the number of converts they had made. But from Paul’s perspective the Judaizers wrought havoc on Christ’s church. There was now division, quarreling and back-biting in the church and people were devouring each other. People were actually spying on each other’s liberty and attacking viciously Paul as God’s chosen messenger. When we remove the offence of the cross, what do we gain? More converts, perhaps, and a more popular message.

But what do we lose? We lose the very freedoms which Christ died to give us. We lose all peace for our troubled consciences which Christ died to comfort. We no longer place our confidence in the power of the gospel to convert non-Christians as our confidence is in the flesh. If the offence of the cross is abolished, we have lost the very essence of our faith. For while the cross is an offence to those who are perishing, for us the cross is our peace before God and our only hope of heaven. It is in the cross that we see the wisdom and the power of God. And in its blessed shadow there is forgiveness of sin and the promise that God regards us as his children and heirs to all of his glorious promises. The cross of Jesus is everything. If the offence of the cross be abolished we have nothing.