

## Gospel, Faith and Freedom (Studies in Galatians)

### Gospel Freedom - Faith & Love

#### Galatians 5:1-15

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Before Christ came the Jews were 'held captive under the law' (3:23), and the Gentiles were 'enslaved to those that by nature are not gods' (4:8). But now that Christ has come, those 'of faith' (3:7, 9) have been redeemed and adopted by God as sons, and are therefore heirs according to promise (3:23-4:7). Any endeavour now to justify oneself by works of the law amounts to turning back and becoming slaves once more to the "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (4:9).

The Galatians had been fooled by the flattery of the false teachers, and lost their freedom, their love and their joy. Paul was perplexed and in much pain over them. To counter the legalistic and false teaching, Paul reminded the Galatian believers that they were free "children of promise," not slaves (4:28, 31).

In the final two chapters, Paul takes up the theme of Christian freedom and how we are to "walk by the Spirit" in this freedom. In the passage before us today, as those who have been freed *by* Christ for freedom *in* Christ, he exhorts us not to *lose* our freedom, nor to *abuse* our freedom. Instead, we are to protect and preserve it. This is done through the Spirit, by faith, hope and love.

#### **Do not lose your freedom (vv1-6)**

Whilst our *salvation* is firmly established in Christ, the *freedom* we enjoy as a result of the gospel can be easily lost by lapsing into legalism. Paul declares that we have been set free by Christ *for* freedom.

- We cannot lose our salvation in Christ, but, as we saw last week we can lose our freedom, our joy and our love.
- It is *on the basis of* our freedom in Christ that Paul commands us to stand firm in it, and not to submit ourselves once more to a yoke of slavery.
- To "stand firm" is a military term. It involves strength, diligence, alertness, resistance to attack, and comradeship.

What does "standing firm" and "not submitting again to a yoke of slavery" look like? It involves not accepting any condition, teaching or conduct in addition to the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus for salvation. Paul provides an example of such addition– that of circumcision, which the false teachers were enforcing upon the Galatian believers.

- Any endeavour to 'add' anything to Christ's finished work on the cross for our salvation equates to not 'more than' Christ, but less– far less. It nullifies the work of Christ.
- To rely upon any work of the law for our justification *severs* us from Christ, and causes us to fall from grace– a hopeless predicament, leading only to death.
- But for those who have been joined to Christ through faith, the situation is far from hopeless. On the contrary, we are enabled by the Spirit to wait confidently and eagerly for the hope of righteousness.

And the reason we can wait with eager hope and anticipation rather than fearful dread and anxiety, is because in Christ Jesus, our righteousness is not contingent upon circumcision or uncircumcision. Our salvation is not dependent upon our obedience or behaviour, upon our success or failure in accordance with the law, but upon faith– faith which works through love.

- Here, Paul has brought together the basic triad of Christian virtues– faith, hope, and love. These are not "self-generating qualities or mere human possibilities. They are gifts of God actualized in the lives of his children by the presence of his Spirit in their hearts" (*T. George, Galatians*).
- "...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..., on the contrary, faith animates the love in which it works" (*G. Bornkamm in T. George, Galatians*).

### **A Personal Touch - (vv7-12)**

Using the imagery of an Olympic athlete, and then of a loaf of sour-dough bread, Paul accuses the false teachers of spoiling the Galatians' faith and freedom. However, despite his astonishment and anguish, and their 'deserting' of God, Paul is confident the Galatians would not ultimately capitulate to the false doctrine of the Judaizers. He denies the allegation that he himself is preaching circumcision, and, using some graphic imagery, he wishes those who have caused the Galatians to stumble might sever something more than just their own foreskins.

- The image presented here is that of an Olympic runner who starts well and leads his fellow competitors, only to have someone, perhaps even a spectator, cut across their path and trip them up (Cf. 3:1).
- The "little leaven" demonstrates how a seemingly minor adjustment to the gospel can bring the entire Christian community to ruin (Cf. Luke 12:1).
- Paul's words are a warning to any and every community of faith to discern and reject any perversion of the gospel.
- Whilst Paul does not shift all the blame away from the Galatians, he does expose the source of their trouble as being "not from him who calls you." By listening to the false teachers they have allowed themselves to be subjected to principalities and powers which only the Holy Spirit can successfully resist. (Cf. 4:9; Eph 6:12).
- Note where Paul's confidence lies– it is 'in the Lord' (v10). He truly believed the Lord had saved the Galatians and that the love of God and the faithfulness of Christ, together with the power and presence of the Spirit in them, would enable them to persevere, and the false teachers would be judged by God (Cf. Phil 1:6).
- Paul also refutes a rumour and false accusation that his opponents had spread about him. This could be a twisting of his principles and practice presented in 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 and 9:20. Or, this could allude to the occasion when Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to gain greater access to their Jewish audiences (Acts 16:3). Timothy's circumcision had nothing to do with his justification or salvation.
- Paul's desire that his opponents would castrate themselves may allude to the practice of certain pagan priests, but it may also refer to Deuteronomy 23:1 where such an event would render the false teachers unfit to enter the temple of the Lord.

### **Do not abuse your freedom - vv13-15**

Having presented his case against legalism of any kind or degree, Paul now addresses the danger at the other end of the scale - libertinism. It is worth noting that he does not connect this danger with the false teachers, but with the flesh. The 'antidote' in this case is similar to the correction Paul gives in regards to legalism - love.

- Just because we are free from the condemnation of the law, does not mean we are free to do as we please according to the flesh. Paul argues a similar case in Romans 6.
- Instead, as free children of God we are under the obligation to love and serve one another - not for our justification, but to maintain our joy and freedom in Christ.
- The way of lawlessness leads only to the very opposite of love– to biting and devouring one another, to the point of consuming one another. This 'spiritual cannibalism' demonstrates just how destructive lawlessness is to the community of faith.

**For freedom Christ has set us free.** And this freedom is best expressed and enjoyed as we live by faith in Christ, in the hope of righteousness, and in love for God and for one another.