

Lesson 9

Freedom in Christ

Galatians 5.1-12

Introduction

Jesus set Christians free! We are delivered from guilt and sin! We are no longer bound to Satan and can live with the knowledge of our immense spiritual blessings. The Galatians were encouraged to embrace these things and not go back to a system of works.

It might be said that Galatians 5:1-12 is the climax of Paul's argument against the Judaizing teachers. These verses contain the same theme of urgency as 1:6-9. Those who taught and those who embraced the teaching of keeping works for salvation would be lost. There could be no compromise. The two beliefs could not simply tolerate each other. Those who embraced the truth absolutely had to reject the doctrine and philosophies of the Judaizing teachers.

Going back to 4:29, Paul speaks of three results of being a child of promise like Isaac.

1. 4.29 – Those who live by faith will be *persecuted* by the one of the flesh. Those who trust in their own performance of the law do not often dislike those who proclaim salvation by grace through faith.
2. 4.30 – The children of promise will receive an inheritance – those of the flesh will not. Those who live by works of the flesh will be cast out of God's household.
3. 5.1 – Believers are brethren in Christ and under obligation to live faithfully for the Lord. The emphasis is to persevere in freedom.

It was for Freedom that Christ Set us Free

Galatians 5:1

1 For freedom, Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Some have suggested that 5:1 is a section in and of itself. During the last part of chapter 4, Paul referred to Hagar and Sarah. Hagar was born a slave and conceived Ishmael through natural means. She represented all that was the Old Law. Sarah had Isaac through divine intervention of God because she accepted God. Sarah represented the New Covenant and the freedom it brings. As we

open chapter 5, Paul brings that point home: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free.* This is why He died. Since Jesus did this, Paul urged the Galatians not to go back to a yoke of slavery through law.

Paul emphasizes this through the imperative *stand firm*. For Paul, the imperative is always based on what God has already done. Because the Galatians are already in a relationship with God via salvation by grace through faith, they needed to follow through in living for Christ. *What God has done gives us the opportunity and power to do what we must do.* As we go through the rest of Galatians 5, Paul explains how the Galatians need to stand firm:

- Defend the freedom they have in Christ, 5.1.
- Determine not to abuse the freedom they have been given; but rather serve, 5.13.
- Live life by the Spirit, 5.25.

5:2-4: Negative Consequences of Seeking to be Justified by Law

Galatians 5:2-4 (CSB)

2 Take note! I, Paul, am telling you that if you get yourselves circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all.

3 Again I testify to every man who gets himself circumcised that he is obligated to do the entire law.

4 You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace.

As we begin with verse 2, we see the urgency of Paul's writing. Here again, he is writing with full apostolic authority, speaking on behalf of God himself. Evidently there were a few of the Galatians who had already caved to the pressure of the Judaizing teachers and become circumcised. Paul wanted to persuade anyone else considering it to not go through with it.

Going through this section, we discover four negative consequences to adding a supplement of works to the gospel.

1. 5:2: When we add works of any kind to the gospel, *Christ will not benefit you at all*. If the Galatians were going to begin trusting in circumcision to gain approval from God, then they had made Jesus of no value. The works driven Christian turns his or her back on Christ and His sacrifice, declaring that individual actions are more valuable than Jesus and His work on their behalf.
2. 5:3: When one lives by works, he is under obligation to *do the entire law*. It is possible that some of the Galatian Christians who were submitting to circumcision believed it was only the "major" laws they had to keep. By getting circumcised they had demonstrated they were relying upon law keeping in order to experience God's favor. Paul says, the one who does that has to keep it all. Fulfillment of only part of the law falls short of God's standard, James 2.10. There is no option to pick and choose. Keeping *every* law is impossible. When a person bases their relationship with God on performance, they must be perfect every time. This is why salvation by law is described as under a curse, Galatians 3.10. It was Moses who in Deuteronomy 27.26 said: '*Anyone who does not put the words of this law into practice is cursed.*' *And all the people will say, 'Amen!'*
3. 5.4a: Living by works *alienates one from Christ*. To be *alienated* is also translated *severed* in other bible versions. It means to be separated or loosed from. The same wording is found in Romans 7.2, 6.
4. 5.4b: Living by works also causes one to *fall from grace*. A person simply cannot live by grace and law. To attempt to be justified by law is to walk away from the way of grace. Law and grace are exclusive alternatives. The Christian cannot have it both ways. The Galatians had once affirmed that they were choosing to depend on Christ for salvation since they were unable to save themselves. Now they were receiving circumcision and were adding works back to the gospel. If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ.

Those who ignored Paul's warnings in this section were in grave danger and needed to make correction.

5:5-6: How Freedom is Maintained

Galatians 5:5-6 (CSB)

5 For we eagerly await through the Spirit, by faith, the hope of righteousness.

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love.

Now having clearly painted a negative picture of what happens when a person chooses a yoke of works over freedom in Christ, Paul next turns his attention to describing how our freedom is maintained. Both verses under consideration here place the spotlight on faith. What does the life of faith look like?

First, v. 5a, **the life of faith is by the Spirit**. We received the Spirit by faith upon our conversion or regeneration, Acts 2.38; Titus 3.4-6. His presence in us identifies us as children of God, 4.6, and His power produces our new character, 5.22-23. Christians *live by the Spirit*, 5.16, and are *led by the Spirit*, 5.18. His control over our life makes the yoke

of law unnecessary, 5.18.²

Next, **a life of faith brings the confident expectation (hope) of righteousness**, v. 5b. As God works on our hearts via the Spirit, we live in hope of righteousness. God is at work in you, transforming you day by day, 2 Corinthians 3.18. Through His power, we are becoming more and more righteous, 5.13-25. Our hope comes via our dependence on the Spirit, which involves our full cooperation with His leading.

Now to verse 6. Here Paul asserts that what matters is our relationship with Christ. Whether or not a person is circumcised means nothing. In other words, our race or social group does not matter. What matters is our union together in Christ, 3.28.

And finally, Christians maintain their freedom in Christ by loving one another, v. 6b. *What matters is faith working through love*. Freedom from law does not imply freedom to live however we choose. Grace brings the obligation to practice genuine love toward others. *True faith in Christ is inevitably expressed by love*. To the Romans Paul wrote:

Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law, Romans 13.8.

Galatians 5.5-6 drives home the point that Christian living is not a life of inactivity and personal freedom. Rather it is *faith working through love, not the flesh working through self-effort*.³ The very nature of love is to fulfill the law's demands. Christian works are the product of one's faith. We work *from* righteousness, not *for* righteousness. It is our love that motivates us.

so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light, Colossians 1.10-12.

² Hansen, G. Walter. *Galatians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

³ MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Galatians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1983, p. 137.

Following the earlier mentions of ‘faith’ and ‘hope’ (5:5), the introduction of ‘love’ here completes the ‘primitive Christian triad’ of virtues—faith, hope, and love. These three together comprise the very essence of the divinely bestowed life in Christ.

5.7-12: Active Apostasy

We see the urgency of the situation in 5:7-8. The Galatians were in active apostasy. They were moving away from Christ and the momentum needed to turn in the opposite direction. What the Galatians were beginning to endorse and practice were not from God. The Judaizers did not receive their doctrine from God as Paul had. Paul compares their influence with a leavening. **They were actually distracting people from obeying the truth of the gospel, v. 7. Those who were persuading them were not from**

Galatians 5:7–12 (CSB)

7 You were running well. Who prevented you from being persuaded regarding the truth?

8 This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

9 A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.

10 I myself am persuaded in the Lord you will not accept any other view. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

11 Now brothers and sisters, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

12 I wish those who are disturbing you might also let themselves be mutilated!

God, v. 8. Just one or two powerful and influential personalities could have a strong effect on individual Christians. We need to be aware of the potential that people can have to lead others away from the truth. This does not mean we turn our entire focus and look “under every rock” or look at every person through the eyes of suspicion and distrust. But it does mean that when false doctrine comes that we deal with it decisively, at our first opportunity. If we fail to do so, its effect can spread quickly.

One of the reasons Paul wrote with such urgency was because the **false doctrine being taught was going to infiltrate the entire church.** *A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough, v. 9.* Now, because of the impact of the Judaizing teachers, **confusion reigned, v. 10.** Before they lived in confidence of God’s grace. Now that confidence had been shaken by the emphasis on law keeping. All was not lost. Paul still had confidence in his brothers and sisters. He expected them to reject the Judaizers and hold fast to the truth. There can be no compromise on doctrinal matters.

Another issue concerning the problem with circumcision is mentioned in 5:11. Some could have been charging Paul with hypocrisy, as he had urged Timothy to be circumcised in Acts 16:1-3. But, if one looks carefully at Acts 16:3, Luke explains the reasoning of Paul behind this act: it was *because of the Jews who were*

in those parts, for they all knew his (Timothy’s) father was a Greek. Did Timothy have to be circumcised to obtain salvation? Obviously not or this would have been the perfect place for Luke to insert the requirement. So, as we turn our focus back to Galatians, we see This is another issue with false teachers: **they spread false reports about spiritual leaders, v. 11.** If, because of this, Paul began to preach on the necessity of circumcision, why were the Judaizing teachers still persecuting him?

5:12 is interesting. What did Paul mean by *mutilation*? Some suggest it refers to castration. While this would certainly be strong language by the apostle, it makes sense for him to use it here. For example, the

act of castration would have caused the false teachers to be rejected by the Jews and would have been something the pagans would have done.⁴ This act would have rendered their teaching to be of no effect, which of course, is what Paul desired.

What's In This for Us?

Freedom in Christ

Just as Paul reminded the Galatians of the freedom they had in Christ; we too should constantly remind ourselves that we are no longer bound by the yoke of sin or societal expectations. It's easy to be pressured by the world to conform, to measure our worth by material success, popularity, or societal standards. Yet, Christ's freedom calls us to a higher standard - one that places spiritual wellbeing and righteousness at the forefront.

Guard Against Legalism

While most of us may not be debating circumcision as the Galatians were, we can still fall into the trap of legalism. It might manifest in thinking that attending church services, participating in religious traditions, or following certain "Christian" norms will earn God's favor. We must remember that it's not about rules; it's about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Love Springs from the Root of Faith

Paul's emphasis on love serves as a reminder that our actions and beliefs should stem from a place of genuine love. Whether it's in our relationships, our workplace, or our community involvements, love should be the driving force. How can we daily show love to those around us, even when we disagree with them?

Beware of Division

The Galatians were divided over doctrinal matters, but divisions in today's church can arise over a multitude of issues. We must always prioritize unity in Christ above all, addressing disagreements with grace and understanding. Like the Galatians, we too are susceptible to allowing disputes to divert our focus from the main mission - spreading the gospel of Christ.

Embrace Responsibility

Freedom in Christ doesn't mean we live without boundaries. We have a responsibility to live a life that glorifies God, to love and serve others, and to constantly check our actions and intentions against God's

⁴ Hansen observes that Paul is probably referring here to a barbaric ritual that actually took place in his day in Galatian pagan temples. The priests of Cybele, the mother goddess of the earth, castrated themselves with ritual pincers and placed their testicles in a box. (Such a box is now on display in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England.) Paul is putting the ritual of circumcision in the same category as the ritual castration of the Galli, the priests of the mother-goddess of the earth, Cybele; it had no more significance to the Gentile Christians than any of the other barbaric, bloody rituals practiced in the ancient world.

word. It's a reminder to not misuse our freedom as an excuse to indulge in the desires of the flesh but to serve one another humbly in love.

For Thought and Reflection

1. In what way do we have freedom in Christ?
2. How were the Judaizing teachers rendering the death of Christ useless?
3. Were the Judaizing teachers and those who embraced their teaching severed from Christ?
4. What are some other passages in the New Testament that refute the doctrine of "impossibility of apostasy"?
5. What kind of faith are Christians to have? How is it described in 5:5-6?
6. Are the contents of 5:9 true? How?
7. What happens when we fail to act quickly or deal decisively with false teaching?
8. Why did Paul have Timothy circumcised?

