

MESSAGE FOR SEPTEMBER 20, 2026, FROM GALATIANS 5:1-6

This morning, we return to our series of messages from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul writes this letter to the churches he'd planted about a year earlier to warn them of the influence of false teachers. These false teachers from Jerusalem had infiltrated these Galatian churches and completely undermined the gospel that Paul had preached to them. They worked to convince these believers that in order to be saved, they must not only believe in Jesus, they must also obey Old Testament law, specifically the law of circumcision.

Up to this point in the letter, Paul has been laying a theological, historical and biblical foundation for his warning. Until this text, Paul has not mentioned circumcision except for once in chapter two where he refers to his Gentile friend Titus who was NOT compelled to be circumcised when they went to Jerusalem.

Paul has written passionately about the peril of living under the law versus living by faith in the power of the Spirit. But here in our text for this morning, **he finally begins to confront the specific problem he had with the false teachers in Galatia.** That is, that **they were seeking to persuade these Gentile believers to undergo circumcision.** Paul waits until he's more than halfway through the letter before he speaks about this.

Paul's delay before confronting the main problem is a common pattern for him in his letters. **His typical pattern in writing to churches is to first prepare believers for his specific ethical and moral commands by laying a theological and biblical foundation for those commands.** As we've said before, in his letter to the Romans, he spends the first 11 chapters unfolding an in-depth theology of the gospel. Then, after that detailed groundwork, in chapter 12 he begins to apply all of that gospel truth with the command, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

The command or the imperative to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" is rooted in **the gospel foundation Paul had laid as he revealed what God in his grace had done for them in Christ.** We saw this same pattern when we went through his letter to the Ephesians. He spends three chapters laying out **a theological basis of what God has done for the believers through the gospel**, complete with two phenomenal prayers for the church, before he gives his main imperatives or commands to the church.

As we've said before and we will say again, the point is that Paul, **by this pattern he lays down in his inspired letters, reveals an absolutely essential truth for believers. That is, gospel-grounded obedience.** That is, that **our obedience to God should be a response to the grace of God we've received in Christ.** If your obedience to Christ is regularly feeling like a heavy burden, something is wrong. Jesus says in Matthew 11 "³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Our obedience to God should be grounded and motivated by God's grace to us through the gospel.

If a believer in her daily devotions over a period of years **internalizes the glories of what God has done for her in the gospel**, she will be able to work tirelessly for the Lord with great joy. That's the pattern of Paul's letters and we must never reverse the order he models for us. That is, first an appreciation of the goodness of God in the gospel and second, our response to God's goodness. **There's also a future motivation for our obedience where we look forward to the grace God has for us in heaven that we'll see later in this text. Paul calls it "the hope of righteousness," but Galatians is predominantly concerned with the grace of God in the past.**

If we, as so many people sadly do, understand the Christian life as some form of moral self-improvement program, we're doomed to failure and frustration. That is NOT what Christianity is. It's as we deeply internalize the goodness of God in the gospel and increasingly appreciate the glories of what God has done for us in Christ (past and future), that we will be much more consistent in obeying, **by faith**, even the most demanding of God's commands with the joy of the Lord as our strength.

We see this same pattern of gospel-grounded obedience modeled in a single verse right here in 5:1. Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The statement of a gospel truth is, "For freedom Christ has set us free." That's the ground of God's grace and *our response* to that gracious work of God through Christ is "stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Standing firm in your freedom is possible because you've been made free in Christ. Christ has set us free from the spiritual tyranny of things like **the controlling power of sin** and **the enslavement of living under the law**. That is, from the bondage of trying to be good enough or acceptable to God on the basis of our obedience.

In verse two, Paul gives a very stern warning to the Galatians. He says, "² Look: [Behold] I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." Paul uses this solemn language here to set a grave and serious tone. He desperately wants these Galatians to know **how eternally perilous it is for a person who claims to be a Christian, but who seeks to be acceptable or right before God on the basis on keeping the law or living up to any standard of performance**.

Paul makes this incredibly blunt statement, "...if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." When you hear words like, "Christ will be of no advantage to you," that should send a chill down your spine. Paul is saying that if you obey laws like circumcision as a way to be right before God then the cross, our ONLY legitimate hope for salvation—its saving work for you will vanish into thin air! In our text for today Paul issues multiple threats to communicate one main truth.

That is: **living for Christ and trusting in your works are absolutely, mutually exclusive**. You cannot lean on both Christ and circumcision or anything you do to merit favor with God. If you rely on circumcision or any obedience to the law, Christ will be of no benefit to you. If Christianity were an internal combustion engine, faith in Christ is the only fuel that will make it go. Any reliance on circumcision or any work to gain acceptance with God is like filling your gas tank with water and expecting the engine to run. You get NOTHING from Christ if you live under the law!

As Paul continues, he cites one reason for this that he's already mentioned back in 3:10. There he says, "¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" Paul is saying that **if you rely on the law in order to be acceptable to God, you have to keep it perfectly**. This is because, **after Jesus died and rose again, the Old Covenant system of animal sacrifices was no longer a valid way to take care of our sins**. Jesus had come as **the perfect, sacrificial Lamb of God who on the cross was offered for sin once, for all**. THAT is what we trust in now for our sin—the sin-cleansing blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus.

That means that if you're trying to live under the old Law Covenant, then you have ONE option—you MUST keep the law perfectly. Paul reminds these Galatians of this in verse three, "³ I testify again to

every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.” When you seek to be right with God by your performance, you must be perfect fundamentally because **God is holy and his standard of performance is perfection.** ***This is why living by faith is the only way to be acceptable to God.***

When we live by faith we’re trusting NOT in ourselves and OUR performance, but in Christ and HIS perfect performance of the law. When we live by faith, we’re justified. That is, God imputes or places on **our personal spiritual ledger**, the perfect performance of Jesus. God’s standard is perfection. Christ met that standard; we cannot. Therefore, **our only hope is to be united to Christ and receive *by faith* HIS perfect performance record onto our account.** THAT is the glory of the gospel.

In verse four, Paul issues another threat to the Galatians and anyone who is seeking to be made right with God by their works or performance. He writes, “⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” Paul puts this in the starkest terms **to shock these Galatians into rejecting the false teachers.** It’s important for us to know that when Paul says “you are severed from Christ” and “you have fallen away from grace” based on the rules of Greek grammar and syntax, that does NOT mean that they had already fallen from grace. **This is a threat** and Paul is saying that the Galatians’ serious consideration of living under Old Testament law, if it continued, would bring about this falling away from grace.

He’s saying, “*You can trust in Christ **OR** you can foolishly try to be right with God by the law. But **you cannot do both!** You can have salvation by grace **OR** you can foolishly try to have it by working your way to heaven. But you cannot have both.* Grace and works are like oil and water—they are absolutely incompatible. As Tom Schreiner says, “*Law and grace are polar opposites.*”¹

Paul uses this grisly language of being severed from your spiritual head, Christ— (this is spiritual decapitation!), to describe **the spiritual condition of those who are seeking to be right with God through their performance.** If you are separated from Christ and **Christ is in heaven**, you are separated from the hope of heaven. Anyone who is convinced that they can be acceptable to God through their works is as good as in hell right now.

Paul uses this stark, threatening language to convey how absolutely perilous it is to be seeking to be right with God on the basis of your own performance. Yet, this is where the world outside the gospel-preaching church is. This is also where **all humanly religious people** are. This is why **any church that teaches that your performance can in any way get you to heaven is a spiritual graveyard for anyone believing their message.**

This is true for those legalistic Protestant churches who wrongly call themselves evangelical, but who are so obsessed with external rules and regulations that they functionally teach salvation by works. And it’s also true for the church of Rome. Though not identical to the teaching of the Judaizers, the lethal mixture of law and grace these churches teach are tragically producing many people whose religion is so works-based, they will never see heaven.

The law can never justify anyone. Paul implies in verse four that **if you are saved by grace through faith**, you will never be severed from Christ. He seems to ground that implication in verse five when he says, “⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.”

¹ Schreiner, Commentary on Galatians.

That word “hope,” as it frequently does in the New Testament, points to the believer’s future in heaven. The New Testament does not mainly use the word “hope” the way we commonly do as a desire or aspiration. “*I hope we go out to eat tonight.*” That is NOT the main understanding of hope in the New Testament.

New Testament hope is predominantly **a deeply held conviction of future blessing awaiting believers in heaven based on the promise of God.** For instance, in Paul’s sermon before Agrippa in Rome, Paul says in Acts 26, “6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king.” All those uses of hope are future oriented.

So, the “hope of righteousness” here in verse five refers to **that sure hope that in heaven believers will be given by God the final verdict of righteousness.** As their Judge, God will pronounce believers “*righteous by virtue of their faith in Christ.*” We believe that NOW by faith that we are declared righteous, but that verdict will be finally, ultimately pronounced in our presence in heaven. That means that when Paul says in verse five, “5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” he’s saying that **the Spirit of God enables Christians to believe in this future verdict of righteousness with such certainty that we can be in a state of eager expectation as we anxiously wait to hear it.** Do you have that sense of eager expectation as you await God’s final pronouncement about you? The point again is that believers must never base their hope on their performance but “*in faith cling to what God has done for them in Christ.*”²

Paul concludes this section in verse six with “6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” Paul condemns circumcision as a way to gain **anything**. It counts for *nothing*. That’s consistent with his argument all along, but what does he mean by “uncircumcision” not counting for anything? We get some help when we remember that circumcision is an act of the flesh. That is, **it’s something people do in their own human effort to try to be acceptable to God.**

In the sense that Paul is using it here, “uncircumcision” means the same thing. This refers to **people who consider themselves to have earned something from God by having a right theology of law and circumcision.** These are people who congratulate themselves on their spiritual discernment seen in rejecting circumcision as a way to God. They fall from grace, NOT because of theological error but because of their pride in their orthodoxy. **No one gets to heaven by being theologically accurate.** Having a right theology of works is necessary, but not sufficient to be saved. You are saved through faith in Christ as you believe the truth of the gospel.

Paul is saying that the only thing that counts is what glorifies God and neither circumcision nor pride in your uncircumcision glorifies God. What glorifies God is...faith. **Faith glorifies God because faith looks NOT to ourselves and what WE can do or what WE believe, it looks to GOD and what HE has done for us in Christ.** Paul’s point in verse six is that **because faith looks to God, it [faith] results in spiritual fruit. And the foundational fruit it results in is love.**

That’s what Paul means when he says that what counts for something is “only faith working through love.” Circumcision is a work rooted in SELF-reliance and accomplishes nothing spiritually. But **faith**

² This phrase is taken from Schreiner’s commentary.

looks **NOT to self, but to Christ and that dependence upon Christ glorifies Jesus**. And the **Spirit of God**, whose mission according to John 16:14 is to glorify Jesus, **is ignited into action by Christ-glorifying faith** in the form of him producing fruit in our lives. **Faith is a catalyst for Holy Spirit fruit**. As we'll see later in chapter five, the first fruit of the Spirit is love. So, Christ-glorifying faith is what compels the Christ-glorifying Spirit into action, and he produces the fruit of love, among others.

We want to give some application for this text but first we need to answer a very understandable question in light of what Paul writes in verse four when he says, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." The question is: **when Paul gives as a warning to believers, "you are severed from Christ" if you live under law, does that mean he is saying that a believer can lose his salvation?** Many believers wrongly believe that **the presence of these warning passages in the New Testament implies that believers can lose their salvation** because, after all, isn't Paul warning believers that they will be severed from Christ if they don't trust in Christ? It's easy to understand why so many think that way, but as we've seen many times before, believers who are genuinely born again are secure in Christ. That is, they cannot lose their salvation.

Just one text of many we could cite to support that claim is in John 10. Jesus says, "²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and *they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.* ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and *no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.* ³⁰ I and the Father are one." That teaching alone from Jesus is decisive on this question. Jesus says of his sheep, "*They will never perish...no one will snatch them out of my hand....no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.*" THAT is security!

So, if genuine believers who **hear Christ's voice**, are **known by Christ** and who **follow him** are eternally secure in Christ, then why would Paul warn believers about being severed from Christ? The answer to that question implies another question. That is: **what are we to think about those who profess Christ, and who seem to be producing genuine spiritual fruit but end up permanently walking away from Jesus and the church?** If you've never met someone like that, you almost certainly will.

When I was graduated from seminary, our commencement speaker was a mega-church pastor from California. Several years earlier, he had been a preaching professor at my seminary and had written a popular textbook on preaching. He went on to be the Director of Church and Pastoral Services for our denomination. But while serving in that role, he left his wife and ran off with his hairdresser and there is no record of him ever repenting and coming back to God.

What are we to think about people like that if, as Jesus teaches in John 10 that believers are eternally secure and will not walk away from him? The text that more than any other in the New Testament helps us put this together is First John 2:19. There John writes of people who had been part of the church and assumedly living as believers, but who ended up walking away from Christ. He says, "¹⁹ They went out from us, but *they were not of us*; for if they had been *of us*, they would have continued *with us*. But they went out, *that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*"

That seems clear. John says that there are some people in the church who are "with" us, but they are not "of" us. That is, even though they are part of a local church, professing Christ and appear to be

genuinely saved, they are NOT genuine believers. As Paul says in Second Corinthians 11, they can be like Satan who can appear as “an angel of light.” That is, as something they are NOT.

That is, they may look very good and genuine **on the outside**, but **what demonstrates that they’re NOT genuine on the inside is that they permanently leave the church**. These are NOT **prodigals** who backslide for a season but repent of their sin and come back. These are **apostates** who prove that **they are not genuine believers by leaving Christ and the church and never coming back**. John teaches us that however genuine a person’s faith may *appear* at some point, if they permanently walk away from Christ and his church, **they were never genuine believers—they were not “OF us.”**

Getting back to the root question which is—**why would Paul or any biblical author warn believers that they can be severed from Christ if believers are secure in Christ?** This becomes a very important question with New Testament warning texts like this one in Galatians chapter five but also in the multiple warning texts in Hebrews which are also very explicit. The answer is that **God gives these warning sections to believers because they are part of the means of grace that he uses to keep people saved. These warnings are expressions of God’s grace that he uses to “preserve the faith of those who have been chosen.”³** These warnings are a means of his grace to keep wobbly believers (and that is ALL of us at times) from departing from the gospel. These warnings do not imply that believers can lose their salvation—they are God’s grace to help keep us saved!

As we close, let’s think about how to apply these truths. I would not be surprised if many of you aren’t finding Paul’s letter to the Galatians to be a bit repetitious. That is, Paul seems to be articulating the same truths in different ways. This book does have a fairly tight focus so **why would the Holy Spirit inspire an entire letter basically addressed to one issue? That is, the sinner’s complete inability to be acceptable to God on the basis of the law or more broadly, what they can do for God**. Why is this such a laser beam focus for the Spirit of God in Galatians? The main reason is because **The fallen nature of believers is hard-wired, spiritually programmed to seek to be acceptable to God on the basis of their own performance**. This tendency to seek to try to be right with God through our works is inscribed in our fallen, sinful spiritual DNA.

The roots of this tendency run all the way back to the fall. In Genesis three, God reveals **what’s at the nuclear core of our sin nature**—who we are in Adam. Adam and Eve are tempted by the devil to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Notice **what is at the heart of the temptation for them to sin** beginning with verse four. “⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

First, we must remember the massive scope of their sin here. They are breaking a commandment from the God who, purely out of his kindness, created them in his own image, gave them a glorious world to oversee and who had been nothing but good to them. They broke his commandment because they chose to believe a creature, a serpent who had done nothing for them and who directly contradicted their gloriously wonderful Creator. So, this is inexplicably stupid, especially for people

³ Schreiner’s wording

who, up to this point, were without sin. But the first temptation the author mentions is that **they would be like God**. They would be like him knowing good from evil. The serpent convinced them that **they had a problem**—they didn't know good from evil and his solution was to eat from this tree.

Do you see the correlation here? They had what they thought was a spiritual problem—not knowing good from evil. But rather than go to their Creator God with this question, they listened to the serpent who had a solution that they, **completely apart from God**, could enact to solve their alleged spiritual problem. They could eat fruit from this tree. They didn't need to go to God to solve the problem, **they could solve it on their own**. When Adam and Eve did that, this prideful, self-reliant nature became indelibly baked into the soul of fallen humanity.

Fast-forward to the Galatians. The false teachers taught that the way to be right, acceptable to God was, in their own efforts, obey the law. **The reason this was appealing to the Galatians is the same reason its appealing to us to try to be spiritually acceptable through our own performance.** That's because **at the very root of our fallen, sinful nature is the twisted, prideful desire to accomplish spiritual or religious ends through our own, sinful and God-less means.**

THAT'S the reason we have **this tenacious desire to be good enough for God or to be like God by what we seek to accomplish through our own self effort.** In the case of the Adam and Eve, it was eating fruit. In the case of the false teachers, it was earning God's favor by keeping his law and God condemns BOTH! Any parent of a toddler knows prideful independence all too well. Anytime you offer to help your toddler with something they clearly cannot do, and their angry response is, "*Do it self!*" you are witnessing this same fallen desire to accomplish something they cannot do on their own.

Our fallen desire, our impulse, our inclination to try to please God, be right with God, be acceptable to God through what WE do is programmed into our fallen spiritual DNA. **We are ALL legalistic, self-righteous people in our fallen nature. This sinful inclination runs so deep that we must constantly fight against it by repeatedly reminding ourselves that righteousness in God's sight can never come from me or any law I keep.**

Believers must internalize the gospel and internalizing the gospel isn't done in a week or month or year or decade. Its done over a lifetime because this prideful old man with his sinful self-reliance must be slain again and again and again. And that happens as we preach the gospel to ourselves and pray that God would help us "stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

If you're here this morning and all of this sounds foreign to you, know that **God calls all people to perfection if we are to get to heaven.** A holy God's penalty for even one sin is death, eternal death. The good news is that Jesus came and lived a perfect life **for sinners** and when we trust in him, God takes his perfect record and applies it to our spiritual account. His death on the cross washes away our sins. And if we look to him in faith, he gives us new desires and new hearts to seek after him and not our own selfish desires. If you haven't done that, please do that today. May God grant all of us the grace to live by faith in Christ alone and not trust in anything we could ever do for him for his glory and our joy.