

Standing Fast in Our Christian Liberty

Galatians 5:1-15

Galatians 5:1-15: *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ² Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ³ And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. ⁴ You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. ⁷ You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. ¹¹ And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. ¹² I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off! ¹³ For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!*

Background Notes

The last verse of Galatians 4 describes ***the believer’s position***, and the first verse of Galatians 5 refers to ***the believer’s practice***. Do you understand the difference? “Position” is our legal standing before God – we are righteous before God because we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. “Practice” is our lifestyle – how we live our lives as believers, based on our position.

Galatians 4:31, regarding our ***position***, says: *“So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.”* The believer’s position before God is that we are free from the Law because we have the righteousness of Christ that comes through faith. We are not enslaved to the Law.

As a result of our position in Christ, notice what our ***practice*** should be in Galatians 5:1: *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”* Because we are free from the Law and free from works-oriented salvation and works-oriented sanctification, ***let us stand firm in our position and practice what we believe!***

Sanctification is the process of becoming more holy and more Christ-like in this life. The Galatian Christians to whom Paul was writing were in danger of falling back into legalistic religion, and adding the works of the Old Testament Law to

their practice of the Christian life. Doing this would deny their freedom in Christ. They would once again be enslaved to performing the rules and rituals of the Law.

Verse 10 indicates that the Galatians had not yet fallen back, but the danger from the false teaching of the Judaizers was there in Galatia. If the believers were to adopt any of this false teaching, they would fall from grace: *“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”* (v4).

Verse 4 sounds like it’s teaching that you can lose your salvation - but it can’t mean that because other clear Scriptures contradict such an idea. The point of verse 4 is that if people turn to the works of the Law to attain salvation, they depart from the way of grace. They would be substituting their own human works for the work of Christ on the cross! There is no salvation for anyone who takes this approach.

This is one of several logical conclusions that must be drawn by anyone who attempts to add works to salvation, or anyone who departs in practice from the position that freedom in Christ is by faith alone.

Doctrinal Points

1. Freedom in Christ cannot include works.

If we stand fast in our position of freedom in Christ, we can’t add human works for salvation or sanctification - for the following reasons:

a. Adding works devalues Christ.

Verse 2: *“Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing.”* Circumcision was a ritual work of the Law, and Judaizers taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation and sanctification. Accepting this false teaching would be saying, in effect, that the work of Christ on the cross was not complete or sufficient. It would be similar to saying today that baptism is necessary for salvation or sanctification. Baptism is good, and the Lord asks us to be baptized, but baptism is not necessary for salvation or for sanctification. If any human work or religious ritual is necessary, then the work of Christ on the cross was incomplete and insufficient.

b. Adding works demands perfection.

Verse 3: *“And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.”* When you put yourself under the regulations of the Law to attain your salvation, you can’t pick and choose what works of the Law you will do. The Law is a unit; you must keep the entire Law. And the Law demands perfection - both then and today.

c. Adding works denies grace.

Verses 4-6: *“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”* Law and grace

cannot mix. Grace is God's **unmerited** favor – we cannot earn it! Thus grace, by definition, **cannot** include human works. Grace plus works is an oxymoron. Add even the smallest human effort - and it's no longer grace.

Notice that verse 5 does not say that believers are waiting, or hoping, for righteousness. We are righteous; that's our present position in Christ. We are waiting for the hope of righteousness when the Lord returns. That's when we'll have our sinless bodies. Right now we are righteous in our position on the basis of faith alone. Our good works follow our faith in the finished work of Jesus. They are works of love, not merit (v6)!

d. Adding works disobeys the truth.

Verse 7: *"You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"* Adding good works to God's plan of salvation or to the process of sanctification is a serious sin. It is disobedience to the truth. This kind of teaching is not from God (v8), and those who teach it will be judged (v10). In verse 12, Paul used strong figurative language for the false teachers of Judaism who were preaching circumcision as a necessary work for salvation, and thus were hindering the Galatians from obeying the Lord. Paul said: "Let them be castrated" – or let them be cut off from the Galatians altogether! Paul used a very strong word here – an indication that this was very serious sin.

e. Adding works destroys God's way.

Verse 9: *"A little leaven leavens the whole lump."* As a little yeast spreads and permeates and eventually pervades the whole lump of dough, so adding just a little bit of works eventually permeates and destroys God's way of salvation and sanctification.

f. Adding works dismisses the events of the cross.

Verse 11: *"And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased."* The preaching of the cross is offensive to people because it offends human pride. It says that no one can add or contribute a single thing to earn salvation, or to attain sanctification - and this hurts our human pride.

Paul argued here that if he were to still preach circumcision or the necessity of works for salvation (as he had once believed), then there would be no more offense. The Jews would not have persecuted Paul, because the offense of the cross would be removed. But there is no question about what Paul preached! **Freedom in Christ cannot include works.**

2. Freedom in Christ is not a license to sin.

Verses 13-14: *"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Recently I heard about a Christian brother who is using his Christian liberty (which he understands well) as an opportunity to sin. There's always a danger when a Christian fully realizes that sanctification is **not** attained by good works. Sometimes a person's response to that knowledge is - "I can go out and do whatever I please!" They tend to think this way: "My sins are forgiven; I'm on my way to Heaven; I have freedom in Christ - so I can do whatever I want - even sin." Right? **Wrong! Freedom in Christ is not a license to sin.** Read Romans 6:1-4.

That kind of attitude indicates that the person really doesn't understand the grace of God. That kind of attitude is a slap in God's face. Because we have freedom in Christ, we are free to live a new life and do works of love - not to attain salvation or sanctification, but to serve the Lord whom we love.

If we serve one another in love, we will keep the Law much more than if we made keeping the Law the focus of our lives. *"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v14).* Freedom in Christ means freedom to serve one another in love. **Freedom in Christ is not a license to sin.**

Practical Application

Don't let legalism ruin your church!

Last week I received a letter telling the sad story of a church that had split. Did the congregation divide over a major doctrinal problem? No. A serious moral problem? No. The basic problem was **legalism**. A group of people in the congregation began to stress some non-essential extras for Christian living, saying that keeping those rules constituted spirituality. If you did not measure up to those requirements, you were not spiritual.

That is works-oriented sanctification, and it's not biblical. It's legalism! Naturally, when the legalists criticized the other church members who didn't measure up to their rules, strife and badmouthing was the result. Now a once-vibrant church lies in ruins. Don't let legalism ruin your church!

You and your church may be "right on" as far as salvation goes. Salvation is by faith alone, and you would die for that truth. But **watch out for legalism in the area of sanctification!** Most church splits result from some of the members adding non-essential requirements to the essentials of Christian practice – and this in turn results in strife, disputes and divisions. **Don't let legalism ruin your church!**