

“Through Love Serve One Another”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 5:7-15; Leviticus 19:1-18

Christ has set us free, which is why Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in the face of those who seek to re-enslave them to the basic principles of the world. The freedom purchased for us (at the cost of the blood and sweat of Jesus) is a precious gift, and is therefore not to be wasted by indulging the sins of the flesh. Our freedom is to be manifest in love and service of our neighbors. For Paul, the choice is clear. Either we place our trust in the cross of Jesus Christ to find freedom—though it be a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks—or else we fall prey to the Judaizers who would abolish the offence of the cross in order to preach a false gospel of human merit, enslaving us under the guise of restraining human sinfulness and earning favor with God.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul’s emphasis begins to shift to more practical matters—specifically the nature of the Christian life. Paul opens with an emphatic assertion; the purpose of the death of Jesus was to set believers free from the elementary principles of the world. Christ’s merits provide us with what we need to be found “right” before God (“justified”). To add the merit of human works (the basic principles of the world) to the merit earned for us by Christ is an affront to God. Our liberty in Christ is the basis for the Christian life because, as Christians, we have clean consciences before God because the guilt of our sin has been washed away by the blood of Christ. Since we are now in Christ, we are not bound by the Law as a means of earning a right standing with God. Once justified, we are free to obey the Law of God since we are no longer slaves to sin. This freedom is the basis for the Christian life.

Christian liberty ensures that we are no longer bound by “things indifferent”—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). All those who have a right standing before God through faith in Christ are free from the elemental things which once enslaved us. Unless we are clear about this, we will not be clear about how to live the Christian life. The Judaizers in Galatia were having much success because they caused great confusion about the gospel, deceiving people to return them to slavery.

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 not allow themselves to again bear the “yoke of slavery” (likely a Rabbinic phrase for obedience to the law of Moses). If anyone does return to law-keeping as a means of earning favor with God, Paul says, they will fall from grace and be severed from Christ (Gal. 5:4). This is no intermural debate. Paul tells us that justification produces freedom in Christ. Yet, the false gospel proclaimed by the Judaizers brings about slavery and bondage to the very things for which Christ died to free us. If we don’t resist them we’ll end up re-enslaved back to basic principles.

But Paul is no libertine as the Judaizers were falsely contending. You can just hear them telling the Galatians in Paul’s absence, “if Paul teaches that we are justified by faith alone and not by works, what place does that leave for good works?” “If people really believe Paul, they will live lives characterized by sin and self indulgence, not good works.” You can just imagine the Judaizers pointing out to everyone who will listen those immature individuals who use the gospel as an excuse to sin, as supposed proof that Paul’s gospel is dangerous. Paul does not take the bait. Instead, he preaches the gospel of free grace, justification by faith alone, and Christian liberty louder and longer. This epistle is proof.

The problem is not that the gospel leads to license, but that those who live in such fashion do not understand, or (in certain cases) truly do not believe the gospel. Paul's doctrine is that the faith which justifies, is also a faith which works in love, not so that we can be justified, but because we are already justified. One who trusts in the merits of Christ is set free to strive to obey the Law of God. But the religion of the Judaizers, on the other hand, is a religion of fear, doubt, and slavery.

Following up 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 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 reality and is of profound significance not only for his own ministry, but characterizes all true gospel proclamation.

In verse 7, he challenges the Galatians to consider carefully, *"you were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"* Calling his readers back to the mind-set they had when he first preached the gospel to them, Paul reminds the Galatians *"you were running well,"* until someone cut in on them; literally someone *"blocked the way,"* (ESV—"hindered"). This kept the Galatians from *"obeying the truth."* Previously (Galatians 2) Paul spoke of the gospel as *"the truth."* Here, he very likely means that by *"hindering"* the Galatians, the Judaizers attempted to prevent people from believing the gospel and obeying the central message of that gospel: that we 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.

Paul tells them in verse 8, *"this persuasion is not from him who calls you."* The source of this deception is not Paul. Nor does their befuddlement come from God who called them to faith in Christ. The source of this hindrance must be found elsewhere. In the most obvious sense this deception comes directly from the Judaizers, who are severed from Christ and have fallen from grace. Elsewhere Paul states that there are more sinister origins to such deceptive teaching. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-5a, Paul says *"even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."*

The three great enemies facing the Christian are the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world (not the planet, but the spirit of the age) is understood to be those material enticements which draw us away from Christ and his kingdom; fame, fortune, or as Francis Schaeffer calls it, *"personal peace and affluency."* In this case, Paul identifies this *"persuasion"* 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 Christianity. 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, effort, and goodness of the sinner. Yet this is what Paul identifies as *"basic principles of the world"* which stands in opposition to the gospel revealed to him by Jesus.

The flesh is the sinful nature which wages a constant and determined guerrilla war against us from within. The flesh (our 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. We will wage war against the sinful nature until we die, or Christ comes back, whichever comes first.

The third foe of the Christian, the devil, 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 a sign of how self-important we are that so many Christians act like the devil’s primary goal is to disrupt their every move. In many circles, anything that goes wrong is blamed on Satan. This is what happens when you neglect the doctrine of God’s providence—the devil caused my internet connection to crash, or he gave me a flat tire so I’d be late to church. Our age is every bit as 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 smart phone, but he hates the gospel of free grace and Christian liberty, a point which is easily overlooked.

In verse 9, Paul quotes a popular proverb, “*a little leaven leavens the whole lump.*” A very small amount of something as potent as yeast can spread throughout a large mass quite quickly with dramatic consequences. The false teachings of the Judaizers spread throughout the whole Galatian congregation in short order. The term “leaven” was very familiar to first century folk, who virtually existed on baked bread. “Leaven” 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 the case of his immediate hearers, Paul remains confident that they will not follow the Judaizers to the point of being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Paul’s confidence is that God is faithful and he will preserve all of those in Christ, ensuring that they will believe to the end and be saved. In verse 10, Paul tells the Galatians, “*I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view,*” i.e., 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 Paul has exhorted them.

It is 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 an unnamed individual: “*and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.*” Paul is clear that the one doing this will receive God’s judgement. The phrase, “*whoever he is,*” does not necessarily mean that Paul does not know this person’s 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 masquerade as angels of light. Paul warns of the inevitable fact that heretics will come. We must be constantly on guard for them because they will not arrive in our mist and say, “Hi!” “I am a

¹ Fung, Galatians, 238.

heretic!” False teachers will get “what their actions deserve,” says Paul. No matter how deceptive they are, God knows those who are his. He protects them through the light of his word which exposes error.

In verse 11, Paul is probably responding to charges being made against him by this unnamed accuser. *“But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.”* 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. While Paul was willing to grant circumcision to the Jews, thereby allowing him to concentrate on the message of the cross, Paul could argue that 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 the Judaizers would do anything to abolish it.

Paul preached the cross of Jesus Christ to both Jew and Gentile. While allowing Jews to continue with the custom of circumcision, Paul never preached that Jews were justified one way and Gentiles another! If he had been preaching circumcision, why on earth was he being attacked so viciously in Galatia? Ear-ticklers tell their audiences what they want to hear so as to avoid persecution like that directed at Paul. The cross is as offensive to Judaizers 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 current interests of our congregations, may attract huge crowds and numerous disciples. They can do this only by abolishing the offence of the cross.

The truth is that the cross is completely offensive to the self-righteous and those who seek to stand before God and boast of their own good works. Since Paul had been preaching the cross through his public placarding of Christ crucified, it is only natural then, that opposition directed toward him would arise. The fact that the Judaizers were attacking his character refuted the argument that Paul was *“still preaching circumcision.”* In Galatians 5:12, Paul again demonstrates his indignation at the false teachers falsely accusing him of hypocrisy. He minces no words with them. *“I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”* Paul’s comments raise several important points.

First, this verse is a clear indication that the inspiration of Scripture does not entail any form of mechanical dictation, but instead ought to be seen as a divine-human confluence. While the inspiration of Scripture extends to the very words of Scripture, not just to the thoughts or ideas in Scripture, nevertheless, Paul’s anger and personality comes through 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. Paul’s anger is evident.

Second, there is a loud Old Testament echo here which is easy to miss. In Deuteronomy 23:1, Moses wrote, *“no one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.”* The historical background to Paul’s challenge is important. During the time of Moses there was a widespread Near-Eastern practice of eunuchs serving as priests leading worship of the various pagan deities. Jumping ahead to first century Galatia and the case of those who circumcised themselves in order to be justified, Paul’s warning is clear. If you start with circumcision, then go the whole way and emasculate yourself! According to Moses, you thereby bar yourself from the assembly of God’s people.

Once again, Paul is reminding the Galatians that if they seek to return to law as a means of justification,

they should take the time to read what the Law actually says! 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. While important and useful if seen correctly as a sign and seal of covenant membership, circumcision could become positively evil when someone was circumcised in an attempt to earn righteousness, and is instead severed from Christ, undergoing the very covenant curse demonstrated in the sign of circumcision (being "cut-off").

Despite his anger, Paul refers to his readers once again as "brothers." As is his custom, Paul begins his argument with an indicative (a statement of fact) which forcefully distinguishes genuine believers from the Judaizers and those influenced by them. The reason why 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 the yoke of the Law. Christ died for the express purpose of liberating his people from basic principles. In his death, Jesus Christ became a curse for us, and in doing so, takes away the guilt of our sins.

The indicative declaration which opens verse 13 virtually repeats the indicative/imperative of Galatians 5:1—"for you were called to freedom, brothers," and is followed by the now familiar imperative, "*only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*" The term "sinful nature" (*sarx* – "flesh") has a very important role in Paul's understanding of sin and grace. The term can refer to bodily passions and lust, and even in a sense to a lower nature within us. But the term is better understood here as a reference to fallen sinners left in their sin and depravity, apart from Christ's redemptive work and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of the flesh (our sinful nature) as the desires of the mind and body which produce works of the flesh enumerated in verses 19-21 of Galatians 5. The freedom won for us by Christ cannot be used as an excuse to indulge the flesh.² Paul is very careful to emphasize that while Christian liberty is a necessary adjunct of the gospel, he is equally careful to point out that 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 sense is that we are not use our freedom in Christ as a pretense for sinning. The positive command is that we are "*through love [to] serve one another.*" This is an 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 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.

² Fung, Galatians, 244.

In verse 14, Paul goes on to make the comment that “*for the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*” This is a kind of theological short-hand wherein Paul is citing Leviticus 19:18b (part of our Old Testament lesson), and is, in effect, condensing the whole second table of the law (commandments 5-10) into one short command. Paul has been contending that believers are free from law (as a means of justification). The Galatians are to live as free men and women and enjoy Christian liberty. Yet, we are to fulfill the law by loving one another, an ability which Paul will go on to explain later in the chapter, comes through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.³

According to the second use of the law, our own inability to love our neighbor as we ought, condemns us and should drive us to the cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Not one of us has ever loved his neighbor as himself. For the justified Christian, the Law (according to its third use) is fulfilled since as free men and women we now serve one another in love, not to be justified, but because we are justified. All our works are acceptable to God, because they are covered with Christ’s own faultless righteousness. Our good works are the fruit of the 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). Love for our brethren (and sistren) 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 indwells us by his Holy Spirit.

No doubt, the practical situation which provoked Paul’s exhortation for us to serve one another in love and not indulge our sinful nature was because of the controversy generated by the false teaching of the Judaizers. As a result of their actions, the Galatians were now devouring one another, as wild animals would do. As Paul puts it in verse 15, “*but if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*” This is certainly why Paul speaks of the “leaven of the Judaizers” because their departure from the gospel has produced 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 actually obeying it!

As we wrap up, there is much here in Galatians 5:7 ff., which 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. 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. The cross reminds the self-righteous that all attempts at good works do not save but only condemn. The cross reminds all that God’s wrath and anger must be turned aside if sinners are to enter heaven.

But the cross also means something else. 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

³ Fung, Galatians, 247.

plainly tell us that we will be persecuted and that many will have nothing to do with us. The cross represents the narrow way. The cross bids us to come and die to self-righteousness and to seek the forgiveness and righteousness of another (Jesus).

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 modern Americans. 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 their perspective because 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 like wild animals. People were actually spying on each other's liberty and attacking viciously Paul who was Christ's chosen messenger. When we remove the offence of the cross, what do we gain? More converts, perhaps, through a more acceptable message?

What do we lose? We lose the precious freedoms which Christ died to provide 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 misplaced confidence is now in the flesh. We lose the God-given ability through love [to] serve one another. We become mean-spirited and judgmental. We become Christian cannibals, devouring each another.

If the offence of the cross is abolished, we have lost the very essence of our faith. 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. In its blessed shadow there is forgiveness of sin and the promise that God regards us as his children and makes us heirs to all of his glorious promises. The cross of Jesus is everything. If the offence of the cross be abolished we have nothing worth having.