

“Live Freely in Christ”

Galatians 5:1-12

Harriet Tubman was an African American slave who lived in 19th century America. She suffered greatly at the hands of her owners and managed to escape slavery to find freedom. Once free, Harriet was determined to free other slaves using the Underground Railroad into Canada. Overall, she managed to free 70 slaves. She earned the nickname ‘Moses’ for her work to free slaves.

However, there were many she couldn’t save because they were afraid. When you’ve lived in slavery all your life, its all you know. One story has it that Harriet was leading a freed slave towards Canada and the slave became afraid and wanted to turn back. Harriet pulled a gun on him (she was a scout for the Union Army in the Civil War) and warned him that he could die now or die as a slave. He wisely chose freedom and successfully made his escape.

The apostle Paul was on a Moses’ like mission in Galatians. He and Barnabas had travelled there as recorded in Acts 14 and started a church leading many to Christ. After he left, Jewish so-called believers who claimed Jesus was the Messiah but insisted that Gentiles must become Jewish in order to gain full acceptance by God were causing confusion. Paul’s letter is his argument why coming under the Laws of the Old Testament was not the gospel message. We see his exasperation in his opening words in 1:6

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!

To return to the Law was to put yourself under the curse of the Law all over again. Paul already claimed that Christ freed us from the curse of the Law by becoming the curse for us:

^{3:13}Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.” ^{r 14}He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

As he wraps up his argument here in 5:1-12 he begins in v.1 with God’s spiritual emancipation proclamation:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

While Paul didn’t put any guns to the Galatians’ heads, we will see his Harriet Tubman-like exasperation and frustration with those who had been freed who were thinking of returning to slavery under the Law of Moses. And as we review once again the essentials of faith alone that saves you and not performance through works, we’re also going to be challenged by Paul that even though we are saved, sometimes we unwittingly let legalistic tendencies creep into our own walk with God. These then becomes divisive issues among believers showing that we are not showing love through grace but self-righteousness by our own laws.

In v.1, Paul clearly claims 'Christ has set us free' reminding us that we can't free ourselves from our own sin. Sin puts us in bondage. Sin makes us indebted to God who requires payment for sin. God set the standard with a perfect human sacrifice needed to pay for our sins. Since every human has sin, God sent Jesus to become a man, live a sinless life and sacrifice himself as payment for our sins to make access to God available. We need to confess our sins and accept Jesus as sacrifice, mediator, Saviour and Lord to be right with God. Now Jesus frees us from sin's penalty (eternal separation from God) and sin's power over us. Therefore, in v.1 Paul is calling out to us:

Stay Grounded in the Freedom Christ Gives Us **(5:1-6)**

The Judaizers' message to the Gentiles was you had to become Jewish if you truly wanted to follow God. That meant observing the Sabbath and holy days, eating according to the Law but it all must start with circumcision because circumcision was the sign of the covenant. Yet Jesus' death and resurrection nullified the need for all that. Paul will argue that if you go back to the Law you are changing the gospel, you are adding a works system to faith in Jesus. He mentioned this 'different' gospel in 1:6, which is not the gospel. The gospel meant good news. The good news was Christ has freed you from a performance-based religion. So *"stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened by a yoke of slavery."*

A yoke of course was an instrument that locked two animals together for the purpose of work. Jesus said to 'take His yoke' on us. Tie ourselves to Him because His burden is light and He will gently guide us and lead us properly. However, each one of us is still tempted to assess our relationship with God based on spiritual activities. So we measure ourselves against others at times. We do it with Bible translations. We do it by the amount of Scripture we read. We do it by how or how much we pray. We do it with theological positions we hold and we assess our level of spirituality by our standards of how we prefer to walk with God. Then we need to ask ourselves,

Are we guarding against rule-keeping temptations? (v.1)

It is a temptation because it can lead to the sin of pride. We are all comfortable with the way we enjoy walking with God (assuming its correct) but if we make that an issue of fellowship where we compare how we do it with someone else (whose way is also correct) then we are allowing a rule-keeping mentality to sneak into our relationship with God. We have freedom in Christ to enjoy God in a wide variety of ways. Do not force your preferences on others. Show grace. Learn from others on their approach to God.

Paul has built his case against law keeping spirituality, now he shows the ramifications of making that choice.

² *Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.* ³ *Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.*

If you go backwards to be circumcised then you put yourself under the burden of the whole Law. The law carries a curse that if you break even one law you are under the curse. Jesus freed us from the curse of the Law – why go backwards?

To go backwards is to nullify what Jesus has done. The focus then becomes about you and what you need to do and not Jesus and what He did for you. Even as believers, we need to be careful that our personal preferences do not become issues for fellowship. So when we are tempted to judge someone based on our own theological practices or preferences we need to ask the question,

Is Jesus the focus or ourselves? (vv.2-3)

Under the Law or any performance-based approach to God you can easily become the focus because you are measuring your spirituality by your actions or non-actions. But when we are tempted to differ with another believer or about a personal preference, we need to honestly ask 'Am I disagreeing with this brother/sister because they are not focusing on Jesus or because I'm not focusing on Jesus? If we're both focusing on Jesus we will in grace allow each other to enjoy their personal preference in their walk with God or worship or Bible reading or practice in an area the Bible doesn't give clear direction on. Law keeping or performance-based spirituality does not completely disappear just because we are saved. Paul was talking to professing believers here. And that extends to the next issue in vv.4-6.

⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Paul makes a radical point here now that Jesus has freed us from the Law; circumcision is no longer an issue. The reason it was an issue was that it defined you as to whether you followed God before, at least in the eyes of the Jews. But under Christ and through grace, outward signs of spiritual practices no longer define us, except for one; love through faith as led by God's Spirit.

The point the Judaizers were making about coming back to the Law and circumcision was that they claimed it was still the main identity mark of one's relationship with God. No, a thousand times no, Paul says. If you are born again and if the Spirit dwells inside you then living by faith should result in sacrificial acts of love. The word love here is 'agape.' Agape love is Christ like love; sacrificing oneself to meet someone else's needs. Someone has defined it as your best at my expense. I will seek your good at a cost to me. Not just resources but time and energy.

If we are trying to justify ourselves to God by our good works, Paul says we're fallen from grace. We're missing the whole point of why Jesus died for us. Even as believers of Jesus

Are we extending Christlike love (vv.4-6)

What does 'waiting for the hope of righteousness' have to do with extending love through faith? As a disciple of Jesus, we understand our true hope is not here on earth. Our true rewards are eternal not temporal. We are looking for those more than any earthly attention or reward. A performance-based spirituality is looking for attention and rewards now. They are not thinking of showing Jesus' love through sacrificial actions. These Judaizers were looking for people to follow them; to increase their following and make them look better. Jesus' followers are less interested in looking to have their egos stroked or needs met. Instead, they are more interested in making life less about themselves and more about Jesus living through them. They sacrifice time and self-pursuits so others can see how Jesus' love changes them.

Paul is trying to show the stark contrasts between a faith-based spirituality focused on Jesus and a performance-based spirituality focused on yourself. The latter is attractive because it is measurable and something we can control. But faith in Christ lets God, Jesus and the Spirit control our life which is much freer and funner.

At v.7, Paul makes one of his familiar sports analogies:

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.

Paul’s frustration was targeted at these Judaizers. ‘Who cut in on you?’ (v.7) ‘One who is throwing you in confusion...’ (v.10). And in v. 12 he calls them ‘agitators’. If we are going to stay grounded in the freedom we have in Christ, we need to

Make Sure We’re Listening to What God Actually Says **(5:7-12)**

This ‘someone’ that Paul is calling out was probably the leader of this group. There was more than one ‘agitator’ but in v.7 and v.10 clearly speak about an individual. One human being used persuasive language, sprinkled with Bible verses to twist what God’s Word actually says about how to be right with God. And we too listen to voices or read their words in well-written books that sometimes are sprinkled with Scripture only to twist what God really says. And of course, they twist the words of the truth speakers like Paul and question his integrity or his character. And because they sound Biblical we don’t check what the Bible says with their words. Which leads us to ask,

Are we listening to people more than God? (vv.7-9)

Paul clearly says ‘*That persuasion does not come from the One who calls you.*’ Nevertheless, we are slow to identify the persuasive well-sounding counsel because we do not listen enough to what God actually says. We cannot spot the error or we are unsure at the moment but we shrug it off as being judgmental or pessimistic. We are never commanded to be naïve. We are commanded to beware of the devil who masquerades as an angel of light and prowls around like a roaring lion to devour.

If you hear something that sounds biblical but the ‘Holy Spirit’ alarm in your head is telling you something is off, do some digging on your own or ask someone who you know can steer you correctly in God’s Word. Do not let people persuade you to turn from grace-living into a performance based approach to God. All it takes is a little leaven to cause bread to rise. I.E. All it takes is a little sin to lead you down a path you never thought you would go down.

He solemnly warns us that ‘*the one throwing them into confusion will have to pay the penalty [or bear judgment].*’ And in v.12 Paul shows his exasperation when he essentially says, ‘I wish the ones who are so eager to see you circumcised would over circumcise themselves’.

But if we have personal preferences about our own spiritual life – the way we read the Bible, the songs we sing, how we take communion, where we baptize, the practices we choose not to do or the ones we feel free to do – and impose them on others, then we could inadvertently become the persuader. Again, Paul is warning believers be careful not to be persuaded by ‘so-called professors of Christ’ to make external rituals on how you measure your relationship with God. And so it doesn’t hurt to ask ourselves this question:

Could we be misleading someone based on personal preferences? (vv.10b, 12)

I am an early morning person so I do my Bible reading, praying and journaling early in the morning. I am wired that way. That’s my preference. There are verses that talk about rising early and praying to God. But not everyone is wired that way. Some of you are late nighters and may finish your

day with a great time with God. Or you need some breakfast first. And we all need to show grace to one another and enjoy each other's freedoms in that. But if any of us make it an issue of fellowship or a standard of our spiritual maturity, then we become persuaders of legalism. Let's enjoy each other's diversity in how we approach God as long as it is according to His Word. God alone is our judge and will reward us accordingly. Let us mislead anyone away from grace and freedom in Christ.

The threat was real for the Galatians yet Paul wanted to encourage them in v.10-11,

¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. ¹¹ Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

Paul expressed his confidence that the Galatians would remain free in Christ and not revert to the burden of the Law. He passionately shared the truth with them and he stated clearly that the persuaders would have to stand before God. As would he, which was why he was willing to be persecuted for preaching the truth. Perhaps we are frustrated like Paul that a good friend or family member is listening to bad teaching or a manipulative 'so-called disciple of Jesus who has cut in on their good race. Like Paul, we can only share the truth with them and our own frustration, but we cannot convince them. We need to trust God for that. So we ask one more question:

Are we trusting God to turn people in the right direction? (vv.10b-11)

Does God know their heart? Yes. Can God change their minds? Yes. We need to remember verses like Phil. 1:6 which says,

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

God began the work, God will finish the work. We can be used of God to keep people in the right direction or point them to the way back, but it's His work in them, not ours.

Paul was frustrated to see God's people listen to bad teaching and being tempted to fall away from God. And so should we. Sometimes we shake our heads and shrug our shoulders and say 'that's too bad about so-and-so' and do nothing for them. Paul cared so he got involved. He said some hard things but there was grace and love spoken in truth.

Maybe God brought a friend or family member to mind during this message that you're concerned about and maybe even frustrated with because they were running a good race and someone cut in on them. Pray for them. Pray for yourself on how God might want you to intervene.

Maybe the Spirit spoke to you about your own preferences or spiritual habits, which you have taken great pride in but sadly, have made issues of fellowship. Be careful of pride. Repent of your own misleading tendencies pushing your preferences on others when they are not necessarily written in Scripture.

But mostly, enjoy freedom and grace in Christ. We already lived in bondage to sin, don't go back in that direction. Extend grace to each other. Show love through sacrifices of time and energy and resources. Stand firm in your freedom in Christ and even better, stand firm with one another in their freedom in Christ as well.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
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