

Stand Firm in Christian Freedom

Galatians 5:1-15

Key Verse: 5:1

“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.”

Chapter 5 of Galatians begins the practical application section of this letter, which continues through chapter 6. As we study this part, we must keep in mind what we have learned so far. Paul’s main point has been that we are justified by faith in Christ, not by observing the law (2:16). In other words, we have a right relationship with God by faith alone, and by God’s grace alone, not by our own works. When we believe in Jesus Christ, God adopts us as his children and gives us his Spirit (4:6). So we enjoy the full rights of beloved children, and call God, **“Abba, Father.”** In chapter 5 Paul proclaims the freedom we have in Jesus Christ, and teaches us how to live in it. Thus far, Paul has used the word “freedom” once, in a passing reference (2:4). In 5:1-15 he expounds more fully on Christian freedom. God has given us wonderful freedom in Jesus Christ. But to live joyfully in this freedom we must guard against two dangers: legalism and licentiousness (doing from whatever I want to do regardless of the consequences). Living in Christian freedom is like walking a golden road leading to the celestial city. But on both sides of the road are ditches that must be avoided. If we fall into either ditch, we get sidetracked and become bound and miserable. Let’s learn how to live joyfully in Christian freedom through this study.

I. Stand firm in Christ alone and reject legalism (1-12)

In verse 1 Paul proclaims the freedom we have in Christ and teaches us how to live in it. In verses 2-4 Paul warns against legalism. In verses 5-6 Paul emphasizes the importance of faith. In verses 7-12 Paul gives a stern warning to false teachers who confuse young believers.

First, Christ has set us free (1). Let’s read verse 1. **“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.”** Paul begins with the words, **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”** This is a tremendous proclamation-the proclamation of freedom-which exceeds President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. To those who are languishing in bondage, the proclamation of freedom is the best news. Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous speech titled “I have a dream” said: “Free at last, free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, I am free at last!” He well

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expressed the utter joy of those who are set free. He was speaking of freedom from racial discrimination. However, in Christ we have a much greater freedom.

In America, “The Land of the Free,” we know of many freedoms. In a speech before Congress in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt mentioned four freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom to worship God, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Human beings need these kinds of freedoms. It is natural that the people of Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya, Iran and other countries are trying to obtain these freedoms. But the freedom Jesus gives is even greater than these. It is freedom from the yoke of slavery under the law. The “yoke of slavery” is oppressive and destructive, more than we imagine. When an ox is under a yoke it is tightly restricted and heavily burdened. His existence is no more than working hard, being beaten, eating grass, sleeping, dying and being barbecued. Likewise, we were under the yoke of the law, burdened by its demands. The law said: “You must do this,” “You must not do that.” When we failed to keep the law, we were condemned without mercy. No one could meet the full requirements of the law. So we lived under fearful condemnation due to our disobedience.

Last summer, one woman missionary shared her experience with some Muslim women in Sudan. She met them at a health club while exercising and made friends with them. She got to know them quite well. On the outside, they were very obedient to their husbands and respectful. They were good mothers and helpful neighbors. In one respect, she felt that she should repent before their example. But she also found that on the inside they were paralyzed by fear of condemnation. This was the motive for everything they did. Their lives under Sharia Law were utterly miserable and without hope. We were in the same situation. But Christ died for our sins and paid the full price of the demand of the law. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (3:13). When we trust in Christ’s merit, our accounts are paid in full. The yoke of slavery is broken. We are free. We should deeply accept and celebrate that we are free in Jesus Christ. We should not go back to the fearful bondage of the law. Let’s stand firm in the freedom that Christ gives us.

Let’s read verse 1 again. **“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.”** The term “stand firm” means to refuse to abandon one’s belief. It is to persist without yielding, even though strong forces press against us. To the Galatians it meant resisting the pressure to be circumcised (2). To us, it may refer to withstanding “the religion of human achievement.” This religion emphasizes what a person does to be saved: living a good moral life, performing religious

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rituals, being a good person, being “spiritual,” giving to charity, and so on. Those who are zealous in doing such things are proud of their self-righteousness and press others to be like them. The temptation to try to save oneself through human achievement can be very strong. However, we must hold on to the gospel (1 Co 15:2). We must remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead (2 Ti 2:8). We must hold firmly to Jesus’ words until we are deeply rooted in the truth (Jn 8:31-32; Col 2:6, 7).

There was a young man named Martin Luther. He studied well and earned a bachelor's degree in just one year. Shortly after, he earned a master's degree, and enrolled in law school. He wanted to succeed his father in a copper mining business. But one day as he walked home, a bolt of lightning struck near him. He realized the importance of his eternal destiny, vowed to be a monk, and entered the Augustinian order. To be right with God he did everything the church demanded, and more. He devoted himself to fasts, long hours in prayer, self-flagellation, pilgrimages and constant confession. Yet the more he did these things, the heavier the burden of sin weighed upon his soul. He felt tormented constantly. An advisor suggested that he study hard to take his mind off of himself. For the sake of academic pursuit and to prepare Sunday sermons, Luther studied the Bible deeply. The words of God began to come alive in his soul, especially Romans 1:17: **“The righteous will live by faith.”** With joy, Luther believed and taught that salvation is a gift of God's grace, received by faith. He taught that faith is to trust in God's promise to forgive sins through Christ's death on the cross. He believed that salvation was God's work from beginning to end. He found true peace and freedom in Christ. Having obtained this freedom, he had to stand firm in it. He was assaulted by corrupted church leaders who profited from legalistic practices. They put him on trial at an official meeting called the Diet of Worms. They demanded that he renounce his teachings and planned to take his life if he refused. He replied: “Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” We can learn from Martin Luther how to stand firm in Christian freedom.

Second, the only thing that counts is faith (2-6). After encouraging the Galatians to stand firm in freedom, Paul warned them not to be circumcised. Look at verses 2-4. To us circumcision may not seem serious. It is a common medical procedure often performed on baby boys at birth. However for the Galatians at that time, circumcision was much more than a physical act; it symbolized submission to the law. Those who let themselves be circumcised were obligated to obey the whole law. Inevitably, this results in helpless bondage. However, there is an even more

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serious result. Verse 4 says, **“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”** If we depend on our own effort to save ourselves, we nullify what Christ has done for us. Our minds and hearts become consumed by our efforts to keep the law, and our failures to do so, and grace is of no value to us. It is impossible for anyone to attain salvation by their own effort. That is why God had mercy on us and sent Jesus Christ to save us by his grace. Here we learn that we cannot live by the law and by grace at the same time. They are mutually exclusive. In order to be saved by grace, we must reject legalism. We should not compromise even a little. There was a man who said he believed in Jesus for salvation. So he went to a church every Sunday morning. But in the afternoon, he went to the Buddhist temple and worshiped Buddha. Someone asked him, “Why do you do that?” He said, “I want to be right with Buddha, too, just in case.” Like him, some people try to add some kind of works to the gospel “just in case” Jesus is not sufficient. In Genesis, when Rachel left her father’s house, she took the household gods with her. She wanted to depend on the true God plus other gods. It is impossible. We must live only by God's grace, and only by faith.

In verses 5-6, the key word is “faith.” Paul explains this faith in two ways. **In the first place, by faith we await the hope of righteousness.** Look at verse 5. **“For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.”** This waiting in faith makes us different than those who observe the law. We can compare those who observe the law to a man who is trying to climb a huge mountain with a heavy pack on his back. He needs to make a strenuous effort, but never obtains the goal. Those who try to attain righteousness through the law live with a sense of futility and failure because they are limited by the flesh. Their lifestyle is legalistic and they are critical. They condemn themselves and others without hope. However, those who wait on Christ in faith are like a man who flies by airplane to the top of the mountain. Those who live by faith in Christ enjoy the peace of God in their hearts. They live by the Spirit and the limitless strength and wisdom that he provides. They are not anxious to secure their own salvation since they have received salvation as a free gift of God’s grace. As they are accepted by God, so they accept others as they are. They have the hope of righteousness, which is the redemption of their bodies (Ro 8:23-24). Of course, God credits us with righteousness when we believe in Jesus. Yet we still have a sinful nature within us as long as we live in the body. So we groan inwardly. But we have hope that our bodies will be redeemed when Christ returns. This hope enables us to renew our strength and to soar on wings like eagles (Isa 40:31). We eagerly await the hope of being with God in paradise forever. This hope springs forth from faith in Christ.

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In the second place, faith expresses itself through love. Look at verse 6. **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”** Here Paul emphasizes that faith is not just doctrinal assent. It is something that is expressed practically in our lives. Faith is not stagnant. It is living, expressing itself through love. It affects our emotions, reason, character, family, neighbors, community and the world. Love of God and love of our neighbors is evidence of true faith in Jesus. This is expressed in worship and acts of service. Jesus said that this love would distinguish his disciples from people of the world (Jn 13:34). Usually, those who try to be justified by observing the law have no mercy, grace, love or compassion. Jesus told the legalistic Pharisees, who criticized him for eating with sinners, **“Learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice”** (Mt 9:13). Loveless and merciless legalists need to be changed by the love of God. Paul was changed from a self-righteous Pharisee into a mother-like shepherd for many people. This change comes through faith. Faith in Christ is the only thing that counts.

Third, Paul's warning for the false teachers (7-12). Thus far in his letter, Paul has tried to help the Galatians not to be deceived by false teachers. In verses 7-12 Paul speaks more directly to the false teachers themselves. He exposes their characteristics and gives them a solemn warning. We learn several of their characteristics here. **Firstly, false teachers are a stumbling block to those who want to obey the truth.** In verse 7, Christian life is compared to a race (1 Co 9:24; Heb 12:1). The Galatian believers had been running a good race. But they were influenced by false teachers, fell into confusion about the gospel, and began to go astray. **Secondly, false teachers share their own message, not God's truth.** Their teaching seems to be sweet to people's ears, for it appeals to their pride and sinful desires. But it is poisonous to their hearts. Only God's word is healthy to our souls, though it may seem bitter at times. **Thirdly, false teachers contaminate the church.** Their teachings are like yeast that spreads quickly. A little bad influence destroys an entire congregation. So even a little false teaching in a church should not be tolerated. **Fourthly, the false teachers will be judged by God.** The one who throws believers into confusion will pay the penalty. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around their necks (Lk 17:2).

Fifthly, false teachers persecute those who preach the cross. Look at verse 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.”** While circumcision is the symbol of the law, the cross is the symbol of the gospel. The message of circumcision is “salvation through human achievement.” It is expressed as salvation through human willpower, science, medicine, technology, education,

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psychology, military power and so on. This is a very popular message. On the other hand, the cross reveals that people are all powerless sinners. Only Jesus' sacrifice can save us from our sins. The message of the cross hurts human pride. So it is not popular. False teachers persecute those who preach the message of the cross. 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, **"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."** When we preach the message of the cross, we can expect persecution from false teachers. Even though there is persecution, we must preach the message of the cross, because it is the power of God and the wisdom of God for the salvation of those who believe (1 Co 1:24; Ac 4:12). Paul had a great shepherd heart for the Galatian believers. He wanted them to be saved by Christ through faith alone. For that reason he resisted the poisonous influence of false teachers, sometimes with strong language (12).

II. The right use of Christian freedom (13-15)

When Paul spoke about salvation by grace alone, and taught that Christians are free in Christ, some people misunderstood the message of freedom. They assumed that freedom meant doing whatever one felt like or desired. This misunderstanding leads to self-indulgence, which is equivalent to licentiousness. So Paul teaches us what freedom in Christ truly means. Look at verse 13. **"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."** We are free in relationship to God. We are free to come to God and enjoy his presence. We are free to worship and serve God. In the past we were not free to serve God because of our sins and condemnation. God is holy and we are sinners. The separation between God and man was represented in the Jewish temple by a thick curtain which hung between the Most Holy Place, where God dwelt, and the Holy Place, where the priests served. When Christ died on the cross for our sins, this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. God opened the way for sinners to come to him freely. Jesus is the new and living way opened for us (Heb 10:19-20). Now we can come to God without fear. Hebrews 4:16 says, **"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."** By faith we can now have fellowship with God freely, calling, "Abba, Father!" "Daddy!" We must not use this freedom to indulge our flesh, but to serve others humbly in love

We are also free to serve others. Paul says in verse 14, **"For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"** We Christians are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. The first

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purpose of Christian life is for the glory of God. The second is for the good of our neighbor. We are to serve others with love. Our freedom in Christ is the freedom to serve others. This gives us joy and continuous freedom. Paul used his freedom in order to win others over to God, as many as possible (1 Co 9:19). Missionary Rebecca Choi came to America to preach the gospel in 1978. Since then she has served others in love in many ways through Bible study, prayer, cooking, visiting, sewing, serving CBF, serving grandmas Bible study, serving the Hannah's meeting, and so on. She did all of this freely, without receiving anything in return. She did this until she suffered a stroke. And still she is doing her best to serve others in love. She is a good example of using her freedom to serve others. Dr. Joseph Chung recently retired after 22 years of night shift work at the hospital. He could have enjoyed a typical senior citizen's lifestyle by playing with his grandchildren, reading many books, and eating at various restaurants with a senior citizen's discount. However, he decided to use his freedom to serve Jesus and others as a missionary to Uganda. He carries a priestly duty to share the gospel with others. God has blessed his ministry abundantly. There are many such beautiful stories among us.

Once, on a trip through America, Mother Theresa met a young girl. This girl was contemplating suicide. She confessed her agony to Mother Theresa, revealing all the wounds in her heart. She asked Mother Theresa what she should do. Mother Theresa answered, "Before you commit suicide do me a favor. Help me with my work in Calcutta for one month. After that I will tell you what you should do." The girl went to Calcutta and served many sick people. In the course of doing so, she gained the desire to live on. One day she said, "There are many people who need my help." At the end of the month, Mother Theresa told her, "Do not be afraid to serve others. And do not give them leftovers. Serve them until you become a sacrifice. Jesus served others because he loved them. As you serve others you will have joy in your heart because you receive more than you give." Love is to serve others. Without love we hurt each other. If we love each other, we are to serve each other. Love is not selfish or greedy. Love is not closed to others, but open. Love is not biting and devouring each other (15). Love is serving others humbly. When we do this, we fulfill the law. May God help us to stand firm in Christian freedom and use our freedom to serve others in love.