

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.

Freedom is a key word in Galatians. In this chapter, Paul teaches us what it means to be truly free in Christ. God has given us freedom in Jesus Christ. But to live joyfully in this freedom we must guard against two kinds of dangers: falling into legalism and indulging the sinful nature. Let us think about how we can stand firm in our freedom in Christ.

First, Christ set us free (1-4). Look at 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.* Jesus set us free from the bondage of sin and death by giving his life on the cross as a ransom sacrifice. But some Jewish Christians tried to persuade the fellow Christians in Galatia that they needed Jesus plus something else. They claimed that faith in Christ was not enough. They told them to observe the Jewish law, beginning with circumcision. But Paul says that to require something other than faith in Jesus is to put an unnecessary burden on the shoulders of believers. Jesus set us free by paying the price of our sins. He said on the cross, "It is finished." He completed the work of redemption. So we cannot improve upon what Jesus already did by observing some religious rules and traditions. Such legalism would take away the meaning of the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. Paul told them, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Let us remember that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. He did not set us free from our sin and death so that we may be enslaved again by some other things. He set us free so that we may freely serve the Lord and others with the love of God. Before Jesus saved me by his grace, I was a slave to my selfish nature. I lived only for myself. Like Levi the tax collector, I was a selfish sinner. I was a slave in the sense that I could not live an unselfish life even if I tried to do (I didn't). But Jesus set me free from sin and death so that I may live a blessed life by sharing the word of God with young people and praying for them. I have freedom in Christ!



Adding something else to the gospel of Jesus is a dangerous thing to our spiritual growth. That is why Paul says in verse 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.* Why did the Apostle Paul strongly urge the Galatians not to be circumcised? Why does circumcision make Christ be of no value to us at all? First of all, we are either saved by faith in Jesus or by observing the law. So to require circumcision means, in effect, to set aside the grace of salvation through the blood of Jesus. It is because, behind the requirement of circumcision is the claim that the law can somehow achieve our salvation or improve

our spiritual life. This is a dangerous false teaching. It sets aside the importance of our personal relationship with Christ. In addition, circumcision may lead to other forms of observing religious rites and traditions. Observation of such rites may provide us some psychological benefits, but it can stunt our spiritual growth by giving us false security that we are doing fine before God when we are not. That's why Paul was so adamant about this practice.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with Jews or anyone else being circumcised and keeping the law. Culturally, there was no harm to follow their customs. In fact, Paul had his disciple Timothy circumcised. Circumcision *per se* was not the problem. The problem was making circumcision a requirement for justification and spiritual growth. Circumcision represented a person's commitment to follow the law. This caused the person to lose sight of the really important thing, that is, his personal relationship with Christ. Paul realized the danger of this false teaching as it diverted the focus of the gospel to something other than the grace of God through our Lord Jesus. Likewise, if we do anything and demand anything of our fellow brothers and sisters which might result in shifting their attention away from the personal relationship with Christ, we are making the same mistake the Jewish Christians made. We should not cause young people to be alienated from Christ. We must come to the word of God and follow his ways not to fall into the trap, as Paul says in verses 3-4: *Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

Second, faith expresses itself through love (5-6). We are set free by God's grace. We did not earn our salvation by our good works. So we live by faith in Christ. In verses 5-6, Paul describes how this life of faith is so different from the life of observing the law. *But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love* (5-6). Paul says that when we accept Jesus as our Savior and live by faith, the Holy Spirit helps us to know that we have been made right with God because of Jesus. Earlier, he said that the Holy Spirit helps us to know God personally so that we may call him, "Abba, Father" (4:6). He also says in Romans 8:23-25: "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

On the other hand, our hope is dashed as soon as we begin to make the law the focal point of our life. Why? Deep down in our hearts, we know that we cannot possibly satisfy the demands of the law. It is impossible for anyone to keep all 613 laws, all the time. It is hopeless. Thank God, we have Christ. *In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

What does it mean that faith expresses itself through love? Faith is much more than an idea or a feeling. Anyone can say with their mouth, “I believe in God” or “I have faith.” But St. Paul says that true faith expresses itself through love. Faith is expressed in love, not in religiosity.

Paul says that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Faith without love is like hamburger without meat, as James says, “Faith without works is dead” (Ja 2:26). Jesus sacrificed his life on the cross for us because he loved us so much. His love was not theoretical. He didn’t just talk about love. He showed his love. Knowing this, how can we have faith that expresses itself through love? We should follow the footsteps of Christ. As Jesus did, we should pray for others. As Jesus did, we should take care of the sick and the poor. Most of all, we should share the message of the kingdom of God with those who are still in the darkness of sin. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will do what I command” (Jn 14:15). Jesus commanded us to go and preach the gospel. He commanded us to make disciples. Jesus said to Peter “Simon, son of John, do you truly love me? Take care of my sheep” (Jn 21:16). We can express our love for Jesus and others by sharing with them God's word of truth. Let us pray earnestly that each of us may have faith that expresses itself through love.



Third, “Who cut in on you?” (7-12). Look at verse 7. *“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”* The young Galatian believers were running a good race toward the kingdom of God, our finish line. They had been growing in faith and love for each other. They had been full of hope and vision in God. Then the Judaizers came to cut in on their race. The false teachers confused the growing new Christians by subtly changing their direction. They planted poisonous ideas in their hearts and kept them from obeying the truth. Bad influence spreads quickly as a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. The Galatian Christians shifted their focus from Christ to laws and regulations. What was the result? They lost joy. They began to argue about religious practices. They criticized each other as they found many shortcomings in them and in others. This could not please God. Paul warns that those who lead young Christians astray will pay a severe penalty (10).

The apostle Paul continues in verse 11. *“Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.”* Circumcision or observing the law had a certain appeal to the believers in Galatia, as it seemed to give them something tangible to hold on to. Circumcision added the human achievement element to the gospel. They felt good to be able to do something on their own for their salvation and spiritual growth. It boosted their ego and pride. But Paul preached the cross of Jesus only, not the cross plus circumcision. That's why he was persecuted. He could have chosen the easier and popular way. He could have become popular. He could have built a mega-church. But he decided to stick to the message of the cross. The cross is offensive to some people because a symbol of shame and suffering. Also, it offends our pride, because it reminds us that forgiveness is a gift

that we cannot earn. We can only come to God with repentant hearts and, by faith, receive the gift of forgiveness and salvation which Jesus purchased for us with his blood. The cross reminds us that we are nothing but forgiven sinners, debtors to God's grace. So proud people reject the cross and look for a way to earn their own salvation. But when we really come to know the grace of Jesus, we can appreciate the depth of his love. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1Co 1:22-25).

As the apostle Paul did, let us stick to the message of the cross, even though it is not popular. The prosperity gospel message, on the other hand, is popular today. It is easy on the ears of people. Some tele-evangelists drop the offensive cross completely in their message or marginalize it. But the way of the cross is the way of our Lord Jesus. It is the way of life. May God help us to share the message of the cross, even if we are persecuted because of it!

Fourth, use freedom to serve one another in love (13-15). Let us read verse 13 together. *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.* Paul reminds us again and again that we have been set free. We have freedom in Christ. Unfortunately some people misunderstand the meaning of this freedom. Many people in our society think that being free is doing whatever they feel like doing. Some even think that to be free means to gratify their physical desires. They want a license to indulge their sinful nature with impunity. But this is not true freedom. It is a way to slavery. Paul says that we should use our freedom to serve one another in love. St. Peter says this as well: "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God" (1Pe 2:16).

Before Jesus saved us, we were not free. We were slaves to our sin and death. We did things that we did not want to do. We were slaves to Satan. We were also not free to come to God. A curtain of barrier was drawn in the temple in the temple so that people could not enter the Holy of the Holies. It was a barrier between the sinful men and the Holy God. But Jesus set us free by dying on the cross. At the moment he died, the curtain in the temple was torn into two from top to bottom. Now we can approach the Holy God freely to worship him. The Holy Spirit helps us to call him affectionately, "Abba, Father." We can love him and serve him freely.

Again, we should remember that freedom to sin is no freedom at all. It is enslavement to Satan. Christ set us free so that we can freely serve God and others with love. In the past, we were not free to serve God and others freely. Instead, we were slaves to our sin and Satan. But now, we are free to do things to glorify God.

We are free to serve others. Legalism makes us to compare ourselves with others



constantly and become proud when we seem to do better and despair when we seem to do worse than others. Paul warns us that if our fellowship is full of arguments and rivalry, jealous competition and talking behind a person's back, we will only destroy one another (15). Christ has set us free so that we can love others. Paul says that the entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (14).

We can use a couple of mathematical equations to capture the essence of Paul's teaching here. One equation is: freedom + love = service to God and others. The other equation is: freedom – love = license to indulge the sinful nature. We have freedom in Christ. But love is an important factor that affects our life of faith and mission in Christ. In fact, we find that when we love God, obeying his commands is no problem. If we love each other by remembering how God loves us, we will not hurt each other, steal from others or envy others.

In today's passage, St. Paul again reminded us that we have been set free by Christ from our sin and death. He then warned us not to fall into the trap of being enslaved by legalism or abusing the grace of God by indulging in the sinful nature. Yes, we are free, but we should use our freedom to serve God and others. We should not use it to indulge the sinful nature of ours. May God help us to stand firm in Christian freedom in our life of faith and mission!