

The Nature of Christian Freedom

Galatians 5: 1-13

May 22, 2022

The scripture passage for this week follows that of last week, just a bit earlier in *Galatians*. As mentioned before, Paul is writing after the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15*) where the decision was made that gentile Christians do not have to become Jews in order to be accepted into the fellowship of the believers. Paul is writing to his churches in Galatia. It seems he has just recently learned that some in those churches have been persuaded that they need to become Jews, and as such, be circumcised and be obligated to obey all of the Law, just as a Jew would. Paul is outraged by this. His own teaching has been that this was unnecessary. Salvation is found through faith and the grace of God, not in obedience to the Law. Why have these Galatian Christians allowed themselves to be persuaded otherwise?

In Chapter 5, Paul compares the gospel message as giving freedom through Christ, as opposed to slavery under the Law. Now, Paul is not arguing that the Law is a bad thing. It has its role. We read of that in Chapter 3, last week. But Paul is particularly concerned that the Galatians will mistake obedience to the Law for what God has given us, as Christians, through Jesus. That is, should one's focus be on obeying all of the many Jewish laws? As if totally doing so would make one righteous enough not to need God's mercy? Paul sees the Law from his perspective as a former Pharisee, who sought to be righteous by obedience to the Law. He was very strict and zealous. Indeed, that led to his persecution of Christians. But he found, in Jesus, that he was going the wrong way. He now sees the Galatians being led off in that same direction. He wants to do something to turn back their focus to God's love and grace, rather than obedience to the Law.

Keep in mind that, at this time, about 49 A.D to 52 A.D., none of our current gospels had been written. The people in the Churches have only received what the evangelist who brought them the gospel had said. In some cases, as this one, they might also receive a letter. It would be at least a decade, maybe more, before *Mark* began to circulate, and the other gospels even later. So, the Galatians would be comparing what they remembered Paul preaching with what these others, telling them that they needed to become Jews first, had to say. They may have also heard other things from travelers coming from other churches. It's not surprising that these was confusion about the Christian message at this early date.

5 ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. ⁴ You who want to be reckoned as righteous^[a] by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working^[b] through love.

⁷ You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? ⁸ Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. ¹⁰ I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. ¹¹ But my brothers and sisters, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,^[c] but through love become enslaved to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

- a. [5.4](#) Or *justified*
- b. [5.6](#) Or *made effective*
- c. [5.13](#) Gk *the flesh*

In Chapter 5, Paul is making a transition from teaching about God’s grace and the Law, speaking through witness and allegory, to exhortation. That is, he’s saying “In light of what I have taught earlier and through this letter, here’s what you need to do.” He is telling them that yes, they are free of the constraints of the Law, but in that freedom, they need to also be responsible to what God intends. Really, this is what the law intends too: **¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

The first verse, “**For freedom Christ has set us free,**” has some interesting background. It is the annotation made on the document given to a slave who had purchased his freedom. The slave would deposit the money into the temple of his god. The priest would then transfer the money to his master “for freedom.” He thus became a slave of his god, free from his human master. The catch was, of course, that the slave had to supply the money. In contrast, for the Christian, God has set us free through Christ. We don’t have to pay the price; Christ has paid it. (Raymond T. Stamm, *Interpreter’s Bible*, Exegesis, vol.10, pp. 545-54) Of course, Paul was talking of a different kind of freedom, a freedom from the chains that could bind one, through the Law, to dwell hopelessly in sin. Someone so bound would be unable to fulfill the Law enough to be considered Righteous, right with God.

The lesson book has some good discussion of our trying to get closer to God by “following rules.” We should want to attend church services, tithe, be of service in various ways, and help others. We do have the danger that these expectations may be seen as requirements for righteousness. Or, perhaps, requirements for others to see us as righteous. This is especially true when someone in a position of authority, or perhaps just highly respected, asks us, or even demands, that we do particular things of these sorts. “Someone has to do it!” Have you heard that? There are lots of things that need doing around and within a Church, and there are always those who feel the need to let others know that they should do their part, perhaps even to telling them to sign up for particular duties and obligations. This can be particularly a problem when a church is trying to maintain some ministry or activity of long standing, but there are insufficient resources or volunteers. We can’t stay right with God just by complying with all such demands. Instead, we run the danger of burning ourselves out, following rules and demands as if they were Law, and thinking failure to do what is expected is a sin that condemns us. How many people leave churches because of being overburdened in this way? I have no numbers, but I have certainly heard of it happening.

Paul is telling us that we are relieved of this burden. It is Christ who sets us free, not our conformity to the Law, or anyone else’s rules about what we are to do and not do. Yes, in that freedom, God expects us to act responsibly. It is our charge to search for where we can act, in love for one another, as God through Jesus has loved us. Instead of being burdened with human expectations, we can be lifted in love to find ways to serve. Instead of being drained by chasing endless rules and expectations, we can seek God as Jesus taught us, loving God and loving our neighbor.

Paul has some strong words about those he sees as adding to other people's burdens (Galatians 5:10-12). That wasn't Jesus's purpose. Read these words from Jesus via Matthew:

Matthew 11²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

As with many things Jesus says, this is non-intuitive. Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him. That's an easier burden than fulfilling the Law? Well, amazingly, yes. As Paul has been explaining, the Law (and rules that purport to lead to righteousness) puts a tremendous burden on us. It's just not within our human nature to fulfil all of that. Jesus, instead, asks us to do what God's love requires. If we fail, God still loves us and forgives us, if we are truly following him in faith. A responsibility to be perfect in all our actions is lifted from our backs. We can be right with God because He loves us. We can live a joyous life that will naturally help spread that joy to others. It is a light burden instead of a heavy burden.

I'd add that we are also relieved of the burden of worrying about “outcomes.” The modern world seems to believe that it is practical to hold people responsible for outcomes, despite the role of chance, perverse events, and sometimes malignant evil in the world. We see this all of the time, most notably in the frequent firing of coaches in sports. “Winning” is elevated over all of the other benefits of sports – things like teamwork, camaraderie, health and exercise, and experience. Of those things, only “winning” lends itself to numerical measurement, and hence is an “outcome” used to justify retaining or firing a coach. That's our human way. Jesus doesn't look at us that way. Have we faithfully tried to follow him? That is what we need to do. It is God's world. He doesn't ask each of us to solve all of the problems. We are free to seek after what particular things God seems to be leading us to do. As we think about all of the problems facing the world, that's a light burden.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to grow freely embracing your call to reflect your love to people close to us, people on the margins, and even people far away. Amen.