5-4-25

Galatians 5:1-12 (1)`

In this letter, Paul gives basically three extended arguments in favor of the Gospel of Christ as he has presented it; while at the same time refuting the arguments of the Judaizers who are presenting a false Gospel. Theirs is a gospel of Jesus plus works; and that is a false gospel even if the works are defined by the law of Moses. In the first two chapters, Paul argued from his past. He testified as to where he received the true Gospel and gave evidence that the Judaizers were falsely representing him. In the next two chapters, Paul argues for his Gospel from Scripture; probably using the very same Scriptures that the Judaizers used, but Paul uses the Scriptures properly and shows who is correct in their interpretation.

Now Paul begins his third argument which is based on results; how the Holy Spirit has actually changed hearts, improved morality, and provided blessings which only come from the Spirit. And one of his focuses is on the freedom gained in Christ.

Just coming from the teaching at the end of chapter 4 which compares Sarah and Hagar as two covenants. The covenant of grace and the covenant of the law. While Paul never disparages the law of Moses, he shows that because of the sinfulness of man, it cannot save us. In fact, it becomes a yoke of slavery.

Therefore, he begins with: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.* Some of those who resided in Galatia were Jews who had converted to Christianity. They may have been tempted by the Judaizers to turn back to the law as a means of helping them on their way to salvation. Paul is reminding them that this was only returning to the burden of slavery that they had been under before turning to Christ.

Many of the new Christians in Galatia were Gentiles who had been under a different slavery. Back in verse 4:8 Paul reminded them of their past bondage: *However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.* In other words, they were slaves to all the idols that they worshiped and the demons associated with them. They were bound by the many rules and ways of dealing with these so-called gods. It was probably exhausting.

Jesus came to set the captives free. He set the Jews free from bondage to the law and He set the rest of us free from bondage to satan, sin, and death. And yes, He set the Jews free from those things also. All depending on whether or not Jesus is accepted as Saviour. So Paul is pleading with them, “Don’t go back!” Why would someone who has been in bondage and then been released, voluntarily go back? Unfortunately, that is our fallen sinful nature, the bondage was comfortable; by following rules it somehow makes us feel like we are in control. And we must be careful even today, because that is exactly what we will do.

Paul admonishes the Galatians, and us, to stand firm. Hold tightly to that covenant of grace that we are under as followers of Christ. The whole point of the Gospel is that we are incapable of doing anything to earn our way into heaven; we must depend fully on Jesus. But satan will tempt us constantly to do things we might believe will help things along; will help Jesus get us into heaven: Again this is a temptation to gain some independence from God; to be autonomous. Exactly the temptation that led Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden. But we are truly free in Christ. Turning anywhere else it to turn to bondage. Stand firm; believe on Christ; avoid the yoke of slavery.

The next three verses are terrifying. *Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.* That should have shaken up the Galatians. It shakes me up.   
And I sincerely hope it shakes you up. Now, while Paul is saying things bluntly to get their attention, he is not exaggerating; and he is not saying these things simply for effect.

Paul is guided by the Holy Spirit; he is writing Scripture; he is writing absolute truth. The one piece of good news is that by the way Paul is writing in the present tense, the Galatians haven’t done it yet; they are still considering. Paul is trying to get them stopped before they commit a grave error. When he begins “*I Paul*”, he is reminding them of the apostolic authority given to him by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

From this authority, he tells them that if they receive circumcision, then Christ will be of no benefit to them. Jesus will be of no benefit. When they stand before God on Judgement Day, Jesus will not claim them as His. Circumcision is perhaps what we might think of as the big step, but it was just the beginning. The Judaizers wanted the people to follow all the law. Paul has already pointed out how impossible that would be.

But he goes on to point out the obvious: if they get circumcised, then they are obligated to keep the whole law. They have to keep every part. And they have to do it on their own. Because what they have decided to do is justify themselves and perfection is required to do that.

By taking that first step of circumcision, they have been *severed from Christ* or *alienated from Christ*. How horrible; they have been cut away from the Vine of Life. They have been cut off from Christ and all His benefits. Since they have rejected the work of Jesus and chosen to justify themselves; they have fallen from grace. Again, what a terrible thought. And the crux of the issue is that trying to add works to Jesus is proclaiming that Jesus’ work on the cross was insufficient. What a slap in the face to our beloved Saviour. And He doesn’t have to take that.

Now I can’t say what happens to the souls of someone who does what Paul is talking about here; God has made it clear that final judgement is His and His alone, and I am grateful for that. But we are to be aware of His word, and this concerns me. This sounds a lot like Hebrews 6:4-6; *For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.* This is someone who understands the Gospel, has even agreed to it for a while, but was not firmly anchored to it. They either turned away entirely, or began following another path. This is apostasy. And because it involves rejecting what the Holy Spirit has been kind enough to reveal; it is blasphemy of Him. It is the unforgivable sin.

It appears to me that Paul is warning the Galatians that they are on the edge of apostasy. He is calling them back before it is too late. They cannot go down the pathway of accepting Jesus and working out their own justification. That pathway doesn’t exist.

Now we don’t often have Judaizers chasing after us. So, how does this apply to us here and now? This applies to us in the many ways that we are tempted to add something to the work Jesus did on the cross or even be lead away from our focus on Christ.

I brought up a few of these a couple weeks ago, but let me expand on them and also refresh your memories because this is important. One of the biggest places for deception is, of course, the internet. There are countless places you can find to hear preachers or get information. And some of it is good. But as is common with the internet, most of it is not. But they can be very interesting and convincing and very good at leading people astray.

Be very careful of any that don’t focus on Jesus Christ. Sometimes the pastor or speaker will focus on themselves or their ministry. Avoid these; they just want power or your money. Be careful of those whose focus is prophecy. A few are legitimate; but there are many who focus on speculation or the extravagant. These are just a couple examples, but all these things have spirits behind them that want to lead you away from Jesus. Your best defense is knowing your Bible.

There are many cults out there. I think we all remember Jim Jones and David Koresh. These were personalities that attracted people; in other words, they followed men and it ended in disaster, it always does. No matter how charismatic a pastor or leader is, we must be careful not to elevate them to the place where Jesus should be. And for fallen human beings, that’s an easy trap to fall into.

I’ve mentioned before the Jehovah’s Witness and the Mormons. They actively go door to door trying to convert folks to their religion; and they are very persuasive with their arguments. And more recently the Roman Catholic church has an effective campaign aimed at recruiting protestants. To turn to Catholicism from Protestantism would be very similar to the Galatians falling for the Judaizers. Catholicism is works-based. You must believe in Jesus and do all the things that the church tells you. Also, the Bible is one source of direction from God; but the church, from the pope and the magisterium is on equal footing with the Bible; perhaps a little more.

There have been a number of high-profile pastors who have converted to Catholicism and also regular pastors. A number of Protestants, perhaps disillusioned with their denomination, have converted. Again, I think of Hebrews 6 and I fear for them all. They have been severed from Christ. Apparently, they were not whole heartedly anchored to Christ. They don’t fully believe what they read in God’s perfect word. So, they were able to slip away. As the apostle John says in his first letter: *They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.* (1 Jn 2:19)

These threats are real and the consequences are real. It can happen to people you don’t suspect; so you must be careful that it doesn’t happen to you. The solution is odd for us because it is spiritual. We must depend on the Holy Spirit. We must depend on the strength of Christ. We must depend on the grace of God. And in depending on these things, we tenaciously hang on to faith in Christ alone for salvation. The Holy Spirit gives us the gift of faith; in that faith, make a decision: decide that no matter what, you will not turn from the truth of Jesus’ absolutely effective work on the cross.

The person at your door may defeat every argument and Scripture you bring up; but stick to believing solely in Christ alone for salvation. That preacher on the internet may seem nice and sincere and know what he is talking about; but if he doesn’t point you to Christ alone, get away from him. Stay in God’s word, stay in prayer, stay in fellowship: these are God’s protection for you. Again, it is spiritual; we depend on the strength of the Lord and not our own.

And that’s where Paul goes in verse 5, *“For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.”* That “we” is “we Christians”; what we do we do through the Holy Spirit. It has to be that way or it is not acceptable to God. Our faith comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit and we use that faith for a number of things. But one of the most important things is: we wait. Faith gives us the ability to wait, because we believe what Jesus has promised us. And He has promised us righteousness. We are covered in His righteousness now so that we can come before God now in prayer; but there will come a time when we will be able to stand before God ourselves, pure.

But don’t miss the importance of Paul using the word “wait” here in this letter. We are to wait, not work. We wait for our righteousness; we don’t work toward it. That is why Jesus is our rest; we no longer work for salvation. That’s how Jesus has set us free; we are no longer under the bondage of working for righteousness we can’t achieve.

Lord willing, next week, we will look into the rest of this passage.

Prayer

Lord, these things that happened to the Galatian people seem like so long ago; and they were things that we don’t deal with. But we know that Your word is still relevant today and that we can apply these teaching to our lives now. We have looked at a few examples but there are so many more snares in the world. Please open our eyes and ears, open our hearts to recognize anything that is trying to draw us away from You.

Help us to live spiritual lives; help us to live through the Holy Spirit. You know that this is difficult for us; but that is what You want us to do. So we know that we are asking according to Your will when we ask You to help us live by the Spirit. To do so will be better for us, but more importantly, it is pleasing to You and will bring You glory.

Thank You for Your goodness and for Your word. You are merciful God and creator of all nature. It demonstrates Your great power and creativity; Your work glorifies You. May You be glorified Lord, by all Your creation along with Your only begotten Son and our Saviour, Jesus.

For it is in His name we pray

Amen