

Galatians 5

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon, welcome again to Ealing Lunchtime Talks. It's really good to see you. I'll probably say this at the end, but this is quite a momentous time isn't it?

This is the last meeting that we're going to have in this room, at least for the foreseeable future. We might be back when they've done whatever they're doing with the building.

But we give thanks, don't we, for the provision of this room. I'll tell you a bit about where we're going to be next week at the end, so stick around for that.

We're going to read our passage for this afternoon from Galatians 5, which is on our sheets. So let's listen to this together.

Paul writes, Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

[1 : 09] I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace.

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.

But only faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view. And the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offence of the cross has been removed.

[2 : 17] I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we pray, Lord, that your written word would lead us to the living word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Help us to listen by the help of your Holy Spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. In this section, Paul argues that something should mark out Christian people from every other people and every other person.

People who have faith in Jesus Christ have something that nobody else has. I don't know if you spotted it. Freedom. Christians are free people.

That's the idea in verse 1, isn't it? For freedom, Christ has set us free. It's at the end of this section as well, at the beginning of verse 13, if you look at the bottom.

You were called to freedom, brothers. The implication is that without Jesus Christ, people are not free. Now, I don't know if that's your perception of the Christian life, or of Christians themselves.

[3 : 40] Maybe not. You don't hear people saying to you, I wish I could be free like those Christians down the road in that church. Shackled in their outdated religion.

Wish I could be like them. Even Christians themselves might not use that word to describe their lives. Many Christians don't get this about the Christian life.

This freedom. And the Galatians didn't get it either. They don't feel this freedom. They don't get the freedom of the Christian life here. Isn't it funny what Paul says to them in verse 1?

Look how he phrases it. For freedom, Christ has set us free. Now that sounds odd, doesn't it?

Because Paul wouldn't say, for slavery, Christ has set us free.

Makes no sense. But that is just a little hint of the absurdity of where the Galatians are at. In effect, that's what they think the Christian life is like.

[4 : 43] Paul has been saying all along, hasn't he? Galatians, you have become free people. Free in Jesus Christ. The most free people that there are in the whole world.

You've been freed, do you remember last week, from the elementary principles of the world. Of the human merit project. You're free from people's opinions of you.

You're free from human traditions. You're free from human techniques and regulations. Your freedom from slavery to God's law as well.

Chapter 4, he says, we were slaves to the law, but now we're sons. We're adopted into God's family. When God looks at you, he welcomes you into his heaven freely.

There's no small print. There's no kind of little type at the bottom that says, You are free to come in as long as you do this and that. They've got this freedom through faith in Jesus, but they can't seem to live it out.

[5 : 50] It's why in verse 1, Paul says, Don't submit again to a yoke of slavery. You see, the heart and mind of a human being is like the heart and mind of an institutionalised prisoner.

After a long sentence, 30, 40, maybe 50 years, who on release day can't cope with the outside world. Can't cope with freedom.

We're so tuned, aren't we, to being slaves to our own pride and our own performance, that we just don't get it when God removes those burdens.

And it's been the same for the history of God's people right from the beginning. Do you remember, God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt, doesn't he?

He brings them out from their chains and from their slavery. And what's the first thing they do when they get out? They want to go back in. They moan about wanting to go back to Egypt, because they think it was better.

[6 : 59] So this freedom that God gives in Jesus Christ is something that we want and we long for, and yet something in us makes us go back.

We submit again to a yoke, to the shackles of performance. And that can happen in all kinds of subtle ways, can't it? But for the Galatians here, it was happening in this particular work, or performance, of circumcision.

That's what he talks about in this passage, isn't it? Paul says in verse 6, it doesn't matter whether you're circumcised or not, that doesn't count for anything when you've got faith in Jesus.

Now, the point of circumcision was, it was something given, not as a way to be acceptable before God, but as an expression of faith.

Do you remember when God gives Abraham circumcision, as a sign of his promises, in Genesis chapter 17, that Abraham is to be circumcised, he is to cut off the skin of his foreskin, and do that with his sons.

[8 : 20] And that was an expression of faith in God's promises, that he'd already given two chapters earlier in Genesis 15. But what happened over time, was that the expression of faith, became the object of faith.

Rather than helping Abraham trust in God, circumcision in the life of God's people, became the thing that was trusted in, do you see?

It became the object of faith. And that is what has happened with the Galatians here. We know people around them, are demanding circumcision as a way of salvation, as the object of faith.

And Paul is incensed with this. There should be one object of faith, the Lord Jesus, but now there's this false contender that's come along.

So what Paul does in this section, is pepper his arguments, with ironic references to the cutting of circumcision.

[9 : 30] It's very clever. He intentionally uses words that sound similar to the physical action of circumcision.

Now I don't know if you noticed these words. The kind of cutting, slicing words. And the separating words. It's quite uncomfortable reading.

It should be for them, particularly if they're men. He says, doesn't he, accept circumcision as the object of faith, verse 4, you are severed from Christ.

He says again in verse 4, you have fallen away from grace. You're separated, you're severed from grace. He talks about verse 11, the offence of the cross being removed or severed.

Verse 12, he says that these false preachers, he wishes that they would emasculate themselves.

It's pretty crude, hard language, isn't it? He's saying to the Galatians, it's as if he's saying, well, if you're so into circumcision, I'll show you what the slicing and separating is really doing and what is really going on.

[10:50] It's a backhanded, sarcastic slur. And he gives them three implications of the things that they are doing here. Accept the work of circumcision.

And number one, you are slicing off Christ. You are slicing off Christ. The way you rely on this cutting action of circumcision is cutting you off from Christ himself.

Verse 4, you are severed from Christ. You see, for Paul, it's either all or nothing with Jesus Christ. You either trust him fully or you don't trust him at all.

You can't trust Jesus for your salvation and a bit of something else and someone else as well at the same time. No, it's all or nothing with Jesus Christ. You can only have one object of faith.

You either throw your lot in with Jesus Christ or not at all. It's either one or the other. So when they choose to add circumcision, they think they can do both, don't they?

[12:09] They think they can trust in Jesus and in this work of circumcision. So what they are doing is when they add to the work of circumcision, they're getting involved with some weird maths here because when they add, they actually subtract from the gospel.

They add the work of circumcision, they subtract Christ. They sever Christ. They take him away. And this is how the true gospel works.

Paul's been arguing if you add your own work to the gospel, you will subtract from the gospel.

Adding is subtraction because it's all or nothing.

It's one or the other. So he says, doesn't he, verse 2, if you keep slicing in this work of circumcision, Christ will be chopped off. He'll be no advantage to you.

The connection with Christ will be lost altogether. It's either all or nothing. It's one or the other. So you're slicing Christ off. Now why is that bad?

[13:14] What's so bad about that? Well, he says, secondly, by doing that, you're slicing off grace. You're slicing off grace. Verse 4, you're severed from Christ, you who would be justified or counted righteous by the law.

you've fallen away from grace. The word fallen away is the word you might use if you can imagine a boat in a harbour and someone cuts the line or the rope holding the boat in.

And the boat is left to just drift out with the tide. That's the kind of image here. Losing Christ will mean drifting away from this thing that Paul calls grace.

Grace is not a substance, it's not a thing like water, but it's a disposition, it's an attitude of God towards human beings.

It is God's undeserved goodness in our badness. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve, his goodness in our badness.

[14:36] So they are cutting themselves off, Paul says, from that goodness and they are saying, Lord, give me what I do deserve. It's not something we ever want to ask from God, give me what I deserve.

We should never want to ask that from God. What we deserve from God is his punishment, isn't it, and his wrath. John Piper, the American preacher, says that when people ask him how he is, he always has the same response.

He says, I'm doing better than I deserve. I'm better than I deserve. And the only way that we can know God and be forgiven is that this grace thing must happen.

That God must find a way of treating us better than we deserve to be treated through the work of Jesus Christ. And so those two things must come together and they are together and you can't separate them.

To have grace, to be treated better than you deserve, you must have Christ. And without Christ, there is no grace. I don't know if you've seen the movie Gravity, starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney.

[15:53] It's a thriller set in outer space. And disaster strikes when Bullock's character, her cord, breaks that attaches her to the space station.

And she is left to drift aimlessly into deepest, darkest space. It's a really terrifying moment until of course George Clooney appears and rescues her.

But it's the idea here, isn't it? That as they slice their skin in this added work, they slice their Christ away and so by they slice any hope of this grace away.

they drift away from the kindness that they don't deserve from God towards what they do deserve. And it's like a domino effect.

If you add to the work of circumcision, it's one or the other, so you cut off Christ and so you cut off grace and thirdly you cut off righteousness.

[16:57] You're slicing off Christ, you're slicing off grace and you're slicing off righteousness. Look at verse 5. For through the Spirit by faith we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

When I was a bachelor, a fellow lodger in our house took it upon himself to renovate one of the rooms on the first floor. It was a big old Victorian house and he wanted to turn this room into a kitchen.

And it came to the job of removing the old floorboards and putting down new ones. But as it got to the point where he was kind of slicing these old oak wooden floorboards he accidentally severed a main water pipe that he'd not detected.

It was part of the old Victorian plumbing. He was cutting one thing but unwittingly in the same action he'd cut something else that he didn't want to cut at all.

The main water supply. The whole room on the first floor was flooded. It was a disaster. It was ruined. And Paul is saying here isn't he, with your cutting you are unwittingly severing the mains.

[18:16] You are severing the way to righteousness. To being right with God. God. In this act of self-righteousness you are severing yourself from true righteousness.

By contrast Paul says doesn't he, the only way to final righteousness, to final rightness with God is by this connection to Jesus Christ in faith through the Holy Spirit.

Verse 5. It is, as he says here, by eagerly waiting with hope in what Jesus supplies. We can't see that connection, can we?

It's not like the film Gravity. There's no umbilical cord between us and Jesus Christ. It's a spiritual connection, a spiritual union.

But it's a real connection. It's beyond our understanding isn't it? But Paul says it's the work of the Holy Spirit who unites people to Jesus Christ, the source of righteousness.

[19:35] Like a husband and a wife are united in marriage. That is what this connection is about as we wait eagerly for the righteousness that comes by union to Jesus and what that entitles us to.

It's a crude illustration but it's like if Jesus takes us to the door of heaven and we're asked well why should I let you in and Jesus says well actually she is with me.

My church is joined to me. She is my bride. My name is on the list of people who deserve to get into heaven and she shares my name she comes with me.

So this union means that we share Christ's righteousness and so you're either united to him getting into heaven or you're united to your own works.

You're either hoping in him and that union or hoping in your own performance. and so if you sever the connection of faith once you stop waiting and hoping in him and you take righteousness into your own hands even just a little bit the mains are cut and you are drifting.

[21:05] We're not tempted are we to do circumcision. Pretty sure we're not tempted to do that today but there are plenty of things that we are tempted to do and things that are meant as an expression of faith in the Lord Jesus things that are meant to aid our faith can easily become objects of faith can't they?

Even good things that Jesus commands us to do Paul throws in that little proverb in verse 9 if you look there a little leaven leavens the whole lump at the point being of that proverb little things can have big consequences small things can have big results they can have devastating results just one little pipe and it can flood the first floor a little addition here and a little thing to add on to Christ there will prove disastrous and it can happen so sadly can't it even with the things that are good just thinking on reflection on this passage I kind of asked the question what would the Apostle Paul say to Londoners to Christians in London today what expressions of faith are you turning into objects of faith it's not circumcision is it for most of us the Apostle might say to a priest who makes the sacrament the object of faith in itself who cuts the bread for mass he would say you are cutting off Christ if you make the sacrament the object of faith or to a leader in a church who makes singing lots and lots of songs we love singing don't we but if you make songs the object of your faith if we say

God is only pleased with me when I sing so many songs or I feel a certain emotion in church you are singing Christ away if you're doing that or he would say wouldn't he to the evangelical presbyterian preacher who studies and preaches and loves expository preaching if that in itself has become the object of your faith if people trust in the preacher rather than the Christ he preaches

you are preaching and studying Christ away you can preach about grace can't you and at the same time preach grace away if preaching itself becomes the object of faith and so do you sense of the irony of what is going on here isn't it in verse 7 Paul says look you were running well Galatians but who hindered you from obeying the truth it's tragic isn't it it's ironic that in their desire to be perceived as obedient they forsake real obedience here in their desire to be perceived as righteous in this work they sever themselves from true righteousness because they've made their works the object of faith and they've cut themselves off from the only true source of it Jesus himself they've divorced themselves from their husband Christ because with Jesus it's really all or nothing and you either trust in him alone or not at all it's either one thing or the other add to Jesus even good things and you will take him away and you will cut yourself off from him and you will submit yourself again to a yoke of slavery but Paul says for freedom Christ has set us free so stand firm therefore you were called to freedom brothers let's pray father in heaven lord we thank you that it is your desire it is your design that we might be truly free people free from the opinions of men and women free from outwards law keeping free from needing to deserve your kindness and your grace is given precisely because we don't deserve it lord we know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump and there are so many ways we are quick to add to the work of Christ and thereby unwittingly cut him off completely lord we know that he is sufficient alone to make us right with you so we ask that you help us to stand firm not submitting again to a yoke of slavery even in the good things that you call us to do keep us from falling away from grace as we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness in him and we pray in Jesus name amen amen well normally I say don't I same time same place next week but I can't say that this week so details of where we are going to meet next week are on the back of the sheets I'm sorry we have got flyers but they're coming tomorrow so we're going to meet not Tuesday but on Thursday same time in Christ the Saviour Church Hall if you don't know where that is we'll be around kind of next to the church just down the road to help you find your way so we'll see you next week Thursday ten past one outside Christ the Saviour Church great