

Galatians 5 v1-11

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[0 : 00] We've been working our way through this book and we come to Galatians chapter 5.! It's page 975. Galatians chapter 5, let me read you verse 1.

! For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. I'm not sure freedom is the first word that comes to people's mind when they think of Christians. I think if we were going to do a poll on the streets today and we asked people what impression they had of us, I'm guessing that the words that would come up are words like careful, and for some of us uptight, a little stuffy. For others, people might say, well they're quite happy, they're quite joyful, but probably way down the list would come the word free. I might be wrong about that. I might hear this week about a young man that I know who's decided to abandon his Christian faith. He did it back in

November, and a few weeks afterwards he told friends of mine that his giving up the Christian faith was in verse 5. 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.

The book of Galatians is, I want to say, mainly about this doctrine of justification by faith. Justification, being declared right with God, is a future event which is made present in our lives today, right now, by faith. Justification is the verdict of God on the last day. It's going to be on the day of judgment when we appear before him. God will say, he looks at us and he will say, this is my child, this is my son whom I love, with whom I'm well pleased. That's what he'll say of all those who are in Christ. There is no record of any sin here put to that account. She is clothed in the righteousness of my son. He is innocent and pure and beautiful before me. You are justified.

And the greatest test about whether you have begun to understand this is, do you eagerly hope for that righteousness? The verdict's been declared to us already. And do you eagerly wait for that last day?

[3 : 15] And I don't think that's an easy thing to do. If you're anything like me, I look at my own life and what do I see? I see failure and sin and lost opportunities. As we worked through the early part of the service this morning and we hear the law of God read. As we hear Jesus' summary of the law, that I'm to love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength and I'm to love my neighbor as myself. That summary of the law.

I don't know about you, but I never think when I hear those words, I've done it this week. I've nailed it this week. I've done great this week. None of us feel that. If you feel like that, come and talk to me afterwards, all right? None of us think, I've done really well, as Reuben read the Ten Commandments this week.

And to say, I look forward to that day when I will stand before him can only be said when you are basing that on the death of Jesus Christ for me. So false teachers, false apostles have come into Galicia and they've agreed, they've agreed that we become Christians by justification.

The problem comes after that. Because we're sinful people, because we sin every day, and if you don't think you sin every day, well again you need to come and chat with me, our consciences condemn us.

We've got so much to condemn us for, haven't we? Satan accuses us and he's got so much to work with in my heart and your heart. But here's the thing, the certain way back into slavery is what Paul calls here the way of circumcision. I don't think any of you here are tempted to be circumcised this morning.

[5 : 02] So what is he talking about? It's talking about the way of religious obligation, which is beginning not to look at the death of Jesus, but to look at what I've done, to look at my moral achievement or my religious sincerity, or to look at anything that is within me. You see, in the cross of Jesus Christ, he gives us a freedom which is from outside the world, and that stretches from eternity to eternity, and it comes directly from him.

And this freedom is being able to look at our own lives, and look at God, and say, I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

And it is freedom, because it is a process of transformation inside of us. It is completely different to moral reformation.

It is being redeemed and not improved. It is true freedom. And God does not set me free from my bad record in order for me to start achieving and building a better one.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. And I find it hard to describe. It is the purest form of freedom, that I am absolutely and completely righteous before God, and so are you through faith in Christ.

[6 : 39] And so it is not the level of my surrender. It is not the strength of my faith, thank goodness. It is not the number of my prayers. It is not the length of my obedience.

It is not the level of my purity, nor is it the depth of my repentance. But it is Christ and Christ alone who loved me and gave himself for me.

So you see, when I do something good, when I've kept up with my New Year Bible reading plan, and I'm up to date, and when I do something good on those occasions, when I do something good, it doesn't change God's love for me.

He does not accept me anymore if I've had a good week. And if I fail him, it does not change his love for me.

He doesn't love me any less than he did before, because through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. We do not obey because he will accept us more, but because he will never leave us nor forsake us.

[7 : 54] And so it is very possible, isn't it? It's very possible to start out by faith, to experience the grace of God, and then suddenly to want to go back to the law. To be thinking that God is in my debt.

I deserve what he gives me. And we begin to think about what we might have given up. And then we begin to compare ourselves horizontally with others, and we resent that my life is not as good as their life.

Why hasn't God treated me like he's treating them? You see, Jesus did not owe it to us to die upon the cross.

Jesus did not deserve to die, but he determines freely to go to the cross out of the freedom of his own grace.

And the man nailed to the cross, offering himself for us, that is the freest action that the world has ever seen. And that's why Paul says in verse 6, in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision or uncircumcision is of any relevance, but only faith expressing itself through love.

[9 : 10] They are remarkable words, aren't they? How do you live the Christian life? Somebody says, how is it that you live the Christian life?

What does the Christian life look at? Look at it. There are five words at the end of verse 6. Faith working through love. That's four words.

You might notice faith expressing itself through love. But faith working through love. Faith will express itself through love. We are justified.

We are declared right with God by faith alone. By faith alone. But if faith is real, and if faith is genuine, it will always be accompanied by love.

And so we're going to look at next week from verses 13 onwards, we're going to see, here's the thing for the Galatians and the false teachers. They were saying, you've been justified, and you've got to make sure you're accepted before God through your religious observance, through your acts.

[10:16] And Paul says, no, it's the cross of Jesus Christ which brings us in, and it's the cross of Jesus Christ which keeps us on track, and it's the cross of Jesus Christ that will bring us home to heaven.

It's the cross that brings you in, it's the cross that keeps you on track, it's the cross that will take you to heaven. And in the end, it is all of Christ. And our freedom comes from the fact that we are justified the hope of righteousness.

Now how can the Holy Spirit live in you and in me with all the sin of our lives? How can he live in us with all the sin and all the mess of our lives? And it can only be because we're justified.

How can we pray this morning? How can we sing? How can we live? It's only because we've been justified. And this is the gospel work of freedom in us.

And Paul says, do not budge, do not move, stand firm in that freedom. Secondly, and more briefly, let's look at making slaves.

[11:27] How does slavery happen to you? How did it happen to the Galatians? How does that happen to us? Verse 2, Paul says now, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept, if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he's obligated, that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed, you are cut off from Christ, you who would be justified by the law.

You have fallen away from grace. Four times there, he mentions circumcision. That cutting off of the flesh.

Four times, he talks about that Jewish historic right of the covenant. The sign of the covenant. A circumcision that's got impeccable religious pedigree.

And Paul says in the starker possible terms that if you go ahead and you receive circumcision, remember they've come from a pagan background, and he says, if you think that by being circumcised you keep going as the people of God, Christ will be of no value to you.

[12:44] You'll be severed, you'll be cut off. It's a play on words from Christ. You will have fallen away from grace. And you might think that's a bit strange, isn't it?

That's strange in the light of the fact that the apostle Paul took Timothy in Acts chapter 16 and Paul had him circumcised when he joined the mission team.

But the reason is very simple. Is that the teachers, these new teachers, they are saying that the death of Jesus, it is enough to get you in, yeah, okay, but it is not enough to help you grow and to continue.

And they are insisting on this impeccably fine religious way to help Jesus along. And it's really important for you and I to see this because false teaching in the church very rarely denies that Jesus is the Son of God.

or it does not deny that Jesus died on the cross. But what it does is it says that we would be safer with God if we just add a little bit to that.

[13:59] If we add some religious practice or some virtue that we can do, we add that to what Jesus has done. And it's the constant temptation of my heart and your heart.

The constant danger throughout the history of the church has been to try and complete what Jesus has done. To begin to operate as if we've got something to add to the ministry of Jesus on the cross.

And what we do is we take perfectly good things in themselves and we begin to insist that my effectiveness and my usefulness and my growth as a Christian depends not on Jesus Christ but on that something else in addition to Christ.

And Paul says here everyone who receives circumcision is bound. They are obligated to keep the whole of the law. And I think that's quite devastating. Why is Paul the apostle making such a fuss?

I mean all the teaching of the Bible all the teaching of the gospel hones in on this one little point. On this one absurd trivial religious right.

[15:22] And so in every age there have been teachers in the church who've said it's a very small thing. why make such a fuss? If you've been on the eldership in Galatia in one of the churches and there's teachers of the law who'd come along and say listen we just need to keep certain feast days.

We need to abstain from certain foods. We need just the boys of the church to be circumcised. I wonder what we'd have done. Maybe we would have welcomed it.

Maybe we would have thought well it's an alternative understanding of Christian spirituality. It's not my position but I understand where you're coming from and it's not going to hurt anyone else. But what is really at stake when you do that?

A few years ago I was working upstairs in Cafe Nero at Ealing Broadway and I began to notice there were people at the tables at the cafe in Cafe Nero who had their Bibles opened.

I don't know if you've seen that. And so what do you do when you see somebody with a Bible open? You're so glad you go over to them and you say you say it's quite as you can I'm actually a Christian it's a great book isn't it? It's a great book. And they were very very friendly they began to talk to me they began to talk about the Lord Jesus they found out I was a minister they found out I came to this church and they wanted to know about it and we exchanged numbers.

[16:49] They go to a Bible study in central London loads and loads of young people 20s and 30s and it would be great why don't you come along why don't you bring some of your people to come along? And we began to engage they began to ask what I thought about different things and then they began to ask about baptism.

And what was really interesting is they were part of a church called the London well it isn't the church it's a sect they're called the London International Church of Christ I don't know whether you've met them. And what they're teaching was was this really when you boil down to it that you could not be saved unless you'd been fully baptised by one of their authorised leaders.

You could not be a Christian you could not be a child of God unless you had been fully baptised by one of their recognised leaders. It was a gospel plus.

It was Jesus plus. You've got to be baptised by us. You've got to do what we tell you to do.

And the Apostle Paul says something very very simple he says this if you add something to Jesus Jesus vanishes. Christ plus circumcision.

[18 : 04] Christ plus anything leaves you with nothing. And if you add circumcision to Christ you're seeking to complete the work of Jesus on the cross.

You cannot have Jesus do half the work of saving us. Either he does all the work of saving us or none at all. And you see the way that it works look at verse 9 Paul says a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

And do you remember lockdown? Those glorious days of lockdown. Different things went there. People got into making bread. Remember that? And everyone was making bread and I didn't make it surprisingly.

But you get a little bit of yeast don't you? And you put it into the pan pot. And you put it into the dough and it was amazing wasn't it?

The shapes that came out before people knew what they were doing? You'd have these monsters growing in the oven. Because a tiny, tiny little bit of yeast affects the whole dough.

[19 : 11] The whole lump. And it's exactly here. The same here isn't it? Paul says this tiny little thing. This little bit of false teaching. Doesn't deny who Jesus is.

Doesn't deny what he's done. But you just need something extra. And it ruins the whole lump. The devil very, very rarely goes for a full frontal attack on the gospel.

But what the devil does is he just adds a little something to it. He adds something fine to it and the yeast spreads through every part. And it's very interesting is that what he does is the way that he does it is he does it through individual teachers.

Individual men and women. Look at verse 10. He says, I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine and he who is troubling you.

I wonder whether he was there when this was read. It's an individual, isn't it? He who is troubling you and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty whoever he is.

[20 : 28] I mean, until now, it's been a group of teachers. But this gospel plus teaching never enters a church in some kind of abstract form. This kind of gospel, Jesus plus, never enters, just floats its way in.

It comes through individuals and this individual is clearly, isn't he, an eminent person. They know who he is and he's teaching the gospel plus. Paul earlier on has said, I don't care if it's an angel from heaven but if he teaches another gospel, whoever he is, God will judge him.

Let him be accursed. And you might think, after all this kind of what we've done, kind of digging into Galatians, that the gospel plus is such a silly thing.

Why is it so tempting? Why is it so tempting for churches like us just to add a little something to the gospel? It's because of verse 11. The reason is because it neutralizes the scandal of the gospel.

The Christian gospel begins by offending you. It's why people don't just slide into becoming Christians. They need to feel the offense of the gospel.

[21 : 40] And if you have never been offended by the cross of Jesus Christ, you've not understood it. Because the cross of Jesus Christ comes to you and I and says, you are so far from God, you are so far from God that it required his son to be slaughtered for you.

You are so lost, you're so weak, you're so rebellious that nothing less than the death of his own son is enough to free us. But the gospel plus message comes to you and says, well, it downplays the negatives and it says, you're not so radically lost.

And there are things that you can do. There are things that are visible. There are things that are physical that you can do to show your sincerity that can gain your salvation. Is it not the role of religion to make you more morally responsible?

Of course, the New Testament, it does call us to good works, doesn't it? But our motivation is the thing that demonstrates our freedom or our slavery.

Do I do good works to assure me of God's acceptance? If I do good works to assure myself of God's acceptance, then loving other people becomes a way of manipulating you because I am loving you so that I can build my account with God.

[23:00] And the problem with living that way is it is a life of slavery because when something gets in the way of my loving you, I become blocked and I become angry or I become frightened or I become depressed.

But when we act on the basis of Jesus Christ, then I am acting out of the fact that God has accepted me and God loves me and there is nothing that I can do that can change that.

And so I am free. I am free to love for the sake of love because it is only through Jesus Christ and it is only through the cross of Jesus Christ that I am brought in.

And it is only through the cross of Jesus Christ that we are grown up and it's only through the cross of Christ that we are brought to heaven. it is gloriously liberating.

But I don't have to be afraid of you. I don't have to be afraid of what people think of. I don't have to be afraid of failure because the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me and God could not love me anymore.

[24:22] And so for freedom, Christ set us free. Stand firm, therefore. And do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

And all the people said, Amen. Let's pray.