

Freedom in Practice (Galatians 5)

In the previous chapters, Paul has explained his own history and revelation from the Lord, shared how the leaders in the Jerusalem church had endorsed how he and Barnabas had taken the gospel to the Gentiles, recounted how he had needed to challenge Peter's inconsistency and made it abundantly clear that Jews and Gentiles are in exactly the same position before they believe in Jesus – bound by rules and expectations – and are on the same footing once they have believed – “justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of law, since by works of law no flesh will be justified” (**Galatians 2:16**).

He has illustrated how it was the **faith** of Abraham (father of the Jewish nation) that put him in right relationship with God, and that the effect of trying to obey laws is to put ourselves under a curse. How that curse is lifted through Jesus' death on the cross and how, as a direct result, “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we all (Jewish and Gentile believers) would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (**3:14**).

He has painted the graphic picture of the young heir who is made to obey a family slave until the day chosen by his father for his coming of age, when he is placed as the son and heir in his father's household, and has shown the Galatian believers (and us!) that we have been put in exactly the same position in God's household. We are no longer under the slavish direction of ‘do this, do that’ in order to try to please our Father; he has brought us to the freedom of sonship and “sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ ” (**4:6**)

He has gone back to Abraham again and made the comparison of Judaism of that time with Hagar and her son Ishmael, the son of Abraham who did not inherit the promises. This would have been shocking in the extreme to Jewish readers/listeners, just as it would have been to Paul himself as a strict Pharisee just a few years earlier. They all prided themselves on being the descendants of Isaac, the ‘son of promise’. No, says Paul, the “present Jerusalem” (i.e. Judaism at the time) “is in slavery with her children” (**4:26**) and those who trust in Jesus the Messiah are the true “children of promise” (**4:28**).

We can imagine the impact that this would have had on any believers in the Galatian churches who might have begun to be persuaded that they needed to fall in line with established Judaism if they wanted to follow the Lord Jesus. Those from Jewish backgrounds might be horrified at the way that Paul seemed to be writing off their exclusive heritage as the people of God. The Gentile believers now found that they **didn't** need to embrace Jewish practices (such as circumcision) after all, but had already been made heirs of God's promises to Abraham. But I can almost hear the howls of protest from the Jewish contingent that ‘it's not fair!’ and there may have been some tension building between the two groups. Hardly surprising then, that Paul emphasises that every one of them who has been baptised into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ and “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (**3:27,28**)

But has Paul's painstaking teaching and persuasion had the needed effect? Is it working out in practice in their lives? Writing his letter from Ephesus or Corinth, of course, Paul can't see how they are responding to what he has already written, so he starts applying the 'theory' to practical aspects of their lives, into **chapter 5 . . .**

Putting it into practice (5:1-6)

5:1 seems to sum up all that he has written so far. The whole purpose of being released from sin, failure and bondage is so that we can experience freedom in practice. "Christ set us free" is the aorist tense, which always means that something has been finished and done 'once for all'. Some translations (and a well-known song) say 'Christ **has** set us free', which of course is true, but the aorist "Christ **set** us free" says clearly that Jesus set us free **at a point in time past**. It is finalised! So, as that's the case, says Paul, "keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." Do we know what a yoke is? According to the dictionary, it is "a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plough or cart that they are to pull." An animal under a yoke is bound to hard work and effort – a good picture!

5:2-6 First practical example: circumcision. This was Abraham's side of the covenant which the LORD made with him in **Genesis 17**, changing his name from Abram to Abraham and confirming the blessings which he had already promised in **Genesis 12** (plus some more). So, for every Jewish male, this was a vital part of continuing that covenant with God and so was absolutely essential for him. But here is Paul saying that, if you become circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you! What does he mean? Simply that, through Jesus, you already have access to the promises which the LORD made to Abraham. (**5:2**)

What is worse is that, by getting circumcised, a Gentile believer would be putting himself under the **whole** Jewish law, obliged to keep every little detail! As an ex-Pharisee, Paul knows only too well what that meant! (**5:3**)

5:4 has an interesting word in it, which different Bible translations have struggled to express fully. They say that those who want to be justified by obeying the law have been 'severed', 'alienated', 'cut off', 'deprived of all profit', 'estranged' or 'separated' from Christ. The picture is clear enough, but the Greek word itself is even more graphic! *Katargeo* means to 'put out of action' or 'make inoperative'. Circumcision may not be a 'live' issue in the 21st century, but by any attempt to achieve justification by our own efforts, we are putting Christ out of action in our lives and have fallen away from the grace of God. A serious warning! ¹

5:5 So, says Paul, by faith in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit (instead of relying on our own efforts), we are waiting for 'the hope of righteousness'. See **Romans 8:23** and **1 Corinthians 1:7**.

If you were a Gentile believer and became circumcised, you would be effectively saying that you thought the promises were NOT yours through Jesus, so you would 'make sure' by getting circumcised – completely pointless! And, of course, if you were already a Jew with access to the promises through your lineage from

¹ If you want to explore this word a little more, see 'Out Of Action' from www.justonecandle.uk

Abraham, you were now a **direct** heir to those promises through faith in Jesus. Circumcision was (and is) now irrelevant! Not our own efforts but faith being effective through selfless love. (5:6)

Who got in your way? (5:7-12)

Once again, Paul expresses his concern that the Galatian believers are being diverted from the truth. Not just away from 'doctrinal truth' but away from the actual reality of what is theirs in Christ. Just a little false teaching can affect the whole church! He is confident that the believers will get it right in the end, but he refers again to those who are causing the problem – who are they? Judgement is coming their way, so he can leave that with the Lord, but he is really angry with them – see **5:12** !!

Whoever they are, Paul says, being easily persuaded like this does NOT come from the Lord! (5:8) Do we find ourselves being easily diverted towards self-effort instead of standing on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ?

As we saw in **Chapter 4**, Paul certainly does not proclaim Judaism any more – what he wrote in **4:21-31** would offend all practising Jews – and so he definitely does not advocate circumcision, which he used to do. As a result, most of the trouble he now gets is from Jews! (5:11) ¹

Paul refers to the cross of Christ as a stumbling block. He goes into a little more detail in **1 Corinthians 1:21-25**, contrasting Greeks and other Gentiles searching for wisdom and philosophy and Jews looking for supernatural signs. The message of the crucified Messiah makes no sense to those looking for a philosophical belief system and is downright offensive to Jews (and perhaps to other 'religious' or 'spiritual' people) who are looking for demonstrations of God's power.²

A life of freedom (5:13-15)

Yes, we are called to freedom, but that is no excuse for just pleasing ourselves! Real freedom results in love which expresses itself through serving others, and this **fulfils** the whole Jewish Law (see **Matthew 22:36-40**). But if we use our 'freedom' to damage each other, we need to beware, because that damage could consume us all.

Natural and supernatural (5:16-26)

"Walk by the Spirit", says Paul, "and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." What does he mean by 'flesh'? The natural, sinful and selfish drive which is characteristically human! We see it all around us all the time. He doesn't say 'you **should** not carry out the desire of the flesh'. This is a different way of living which relies totally on the new life of the Holy Spirit living inside us, flowing out and showing himself in our transformed lives, not on our efforts to live good lives. In **Romans 8:2**, Paul calls it "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus". Not an external law, telling us what to do or not do, but the life of the Holy Spirit working within us. ³

¹ Interestingly, a few years earlier, Paul had thought it was a good idea for Timothy to be circumcised 'because of the Jews' (**Acts 16:1-3**). Now, at least 3 years later, he has evidently become much clearer about it!

² The Greek word translated 'stumbling block' is *skandalon*, from which we get our word scandal.

³ See also 'Two Trees', 'DIY Religion?' and 'What Does God Want Me To Do?' From

There's a battle going on! Natural humanity pulls one way, the Holy Spirit the other way. So much of a struggle that we can't work out what to do! **BUT** there is a solution, says Paul: "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law." (5:17-18)

It's easy to see what the actions of natural human nature are, and he lists some of them in 5:19-21, with a repeated warning that people who live like that are not heirs of the kingdom of God. These are deeds that people **do**, not things that happen to them. Choice is involved. Earlier in this letter, Paul has written at some length about being heirs of the promises made to Abraham. Lives that look like this, he says, have no place in that inheritance.

But then he has a list of opposite characteristics in 5:22-23, and he calls them "the fruit of the Spirit". Not 'fruits' but one single fruit, the demonstration of the life of Christ visible in the life of the believer. The result, not of great effort to achieve, but of the ability of God the Holy Spirit to make us progressively more like his Son. This is what Paul meant about Christ being 'formed' in the believers there (4:19).

¹ And then, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, he adds " . . . and there's no law against any of these!"

So, what's the solution to the problem of the natural human nature? More effort required to try NOT to do these wrong things? **NO**, says Paul, the solution has already been provided; your old life is already dead. If you are Christ's person, you already crucified that old life with all its 'passions and desires' (5:24) (Another aorist tense : 'finished and done'). By being joined to Jesus, your old life was crucified with him (**Romans 6:6**). He already touched on this vital truth at the end of **chapter 2**, and writes much more about it in **Romans 6:1-7:13**. We need to know it and count on it!

If we have life by the Holy Spirit (and we do!), let us also walk (literally 'walk in line') by the Spirit (5:25).

No boasting about ourselves, no winding each other up or envying each other (5:26) !

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You will find more in this short series about Paul, his background and ministry in Galatia, in 'Paul – A Man Prepared', 'Paul in Galatia', 'The Message and the Messenger (Galatians 1 & 2)', 'Following Rules Doesn't Work (Galatians 3)' and 'The Freedom of Sonship (Galatians 4)', all from www.justonecandle.uk

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¹ "Christian progress is not a question of attaining to some abstract standard, or of pressing through to some far-off goal . . . You advance spiritually by finding out what you really are, not by trying to become what you hope to be. That goal you will never reach, however earnestly you strive." Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?*, Chapter 10.