

**Galatians 5:1-12**  
**September 13, 2020**

1) Galatians 5:1 – Christ Has Set Us Free

- a) In the New Revised Standard Version there is a paragraph break following verse 1 suggesting that the verse is best understood as a part of the argument in chapter 4 concerning the Old Testament law. As you will see, I want to affirm the strong connections between verse 1 and what precedes it in chapter 4. However, this single verse has enough importance for it to stand on its own apart from what precedes it and what follows. “For freedom Christ has set us free” needs to be understood as crucially important regardless of Paul’s argumentation concerning circumcision.
- b) When Paul speaks of freedom, it clearly has reference to what he has said in chapter 4. In 4:10 Paul speaks of freedom from “observing special days, months, and seasons, and years.” In verse 9 he speaks of freedom from the “elemental spirits.” In verse 8 he speaks of freedom from things that “by nature are not gods.” Earlier in chapter 3 Paul spoke of freedom from sin and freedom from the curse of the law. It is undeniable that when Paul speaks of freedom in 5:1 he has in mind those things from which Christ has set us free. The salvation experience breaks the bonds that had heretofore enslaved us in our sins as well as breaking the shackles of the law. The death of Christ brings freedom to the believer.
- c) The salvation experience not only frees us from a sinful past, but this verse announces it does much more. What is the purpose of being set free? Now that we are set free, what are we to do? This verse answers those questions. Notice carefully what is said here in this carefully crafted verse: we are set free so that we might set others free. The purpose of gaining our freedom in Christ is that we might live a life bringing freedom to others. Having gained our freedom, our task is to assure that all others can gain freedom for themselves. For the teacher this means freeing others from ignorance. For the doctor this means freeing others from sickness. For the lawyer this means freeing from legal entanglements. For the friend this means freeing others from loneliness. For each of us it means freeing those around us from whatever shackles them. We are called to extend freedom to those who are shackled by racism, poverty, injustice, abuse, and any other inhumane limitation. This verse not only looks backward to what Christ has done for us, it also looks forward to our calling and what we are meant to do. We are set free for the tasks of setting free.
- d) The plural terminology used by Paul when he says “Christ has set **us** free” underscores the profoundly equal status of all members of the Christian faith whether from a Jewish or Gentile background. The language is also important when Paul warns the Galatians, “do not to submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Jeremiah used the symbol of a yoke to describe enslavement to the law. Of course, the yoke was the very symbol of a

submissive animal enslaved by its master. Paul is asking the Galatian Christians, why they would want to return to a life of enslavement having tasted of freedom in Christ. Such a choice would be the height of foolishness.

## 2) Galatians 5:2-6 – Paul’s Testimony of Freedom

- a) This paragraph begins with a formal pronouncement spoken in an authoritative fashion, and then it is repeated: “Now I, Paul, say to you... I testify again...” Paul is speaking here from the depth of his personal experience. The Galatians have been seduced by false preachers who were trying to convince them that they must fulfill Jewish law and be circumcised if they are to be true Christians. Paul observed Jewish legal requirements as rigidly as anyone ever could. He was zealous for his Jewish faith to the extent that he persecuted renegade Jews who professed to be followers of Christ. Paul had traveled the road of religious fanaticism and was scrupulous in his keeping of the law. No one could claim to be a more meticulous keeper of the law than Paul himself. He had been a strong proponent of the crucial nature of circumcision. It was for him the most clearly visible sign of his religious commitment. He had lived the life of a person who felt fully justified in terms of the law. Therefore, he feels he has the right and authority to address the Galatians on this issue.
- b) Paul’s proclamation is unambiguous for any Christian thinking that he needs to be circumcised. He states in verse 2, “Christ will be of no benefit to you.” He goes on to state in verse 4 that such persons “have cut yourselves off from Christ and have fallen away from grace.” Charles Cousar puts it succinctly in his commentary when he writes, “There is simply no way to tack circumcision on to the gospel of grace. It would mean that Christ died in vain.” If Christ freed us from sin and provided salvation for us, what else is necessary? By insisting that one must be circumcised, are you saying that the mercy of Christ is incomplete? Has Christ died in vain if you feel the need of something else to assure your salvation? For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ is sufficient for anyone.
- c) In verse 3 Paul reminds his detractors in Galatia that you can’t cherry pick which portions of the law you intend to follow. If you’re going to insist on the necessity of circumcision, which is the central identifying mark of one who accepts the authority of the Torah, then you cannot dispense of the other religious regulations of the Jewish faith. Will you now insist on temple worship and a kosher diet? Will you now adhere scrupulously to the Jewish calendar? Like the song from Oklahoma, for Paul it’s “all or nothing... It can’t be in between. It can’t be now and then. No half and half romance will do.”
- d) In verse 4 Paul speaks of persons who have “fallen away from grace.” For persons steeped in Baptist doctrine of “once saved always saved,” the possibility of falling from grace is anathema. The whole thrust of Paul’s teaching is that persons are saved, not by our accomplishments such as circumcision, but by God’s grace. Salvation is something

done for us and not by us. If salvation is God's doing, how can we lose our salvation by something we do? There are many who live in fear that they have committed the unpardonable sin and have forever lost God's mercy. However, Paul's argument here is just the opposite. God's gift of salvation is not based on our religious behavior or pious action. We don't gain salvation by what we do. Those who are insisting that Christians must be circumcised are arguing that only our actions can assure that we abide in God's favor. Paul rejects that understanding and insists that when we seek to find justification in the law we fall from grace, because we are declaring the work of Christ is incomplete and insufficient. To insist on the necessity of circumcision is to declare that God's grace is not enough. You have heard me refer to Henri Nouwen's fascination with the trapeze artists as an example of the sufficiency of divine grace. In successfully accomplishing their amazing feats, there are 2 distinct duties of the trapeze acrobats. It is the catcher's job to grab and hold securely onto his partner. It is the flyers job to simply be available, to be there with outstretched arms. If the flyer tries to be the one who grabs and holds, it will be a complete failure. It is the same with the process of salvation. Our job is simply to make ourselves available and trust the strong hands of Christ to grasp us and never let us go.

- e) In verse 5 Paul focuses on the future as he speaks of "the hope of righteousness." Perhaps Paul has in mind the prophetic concept of the Old Testament when God's justice will rain down on us like mighty waters and the oppressed will finally be vindicated. In the context of this chapter, Paul is mentioning the surety of hope to calm our fretfulness as we search for ways to assure salvation. He is saying to us, be calm and patient. It is not necessary for us to seek circumcision or anything else to assure that we are part of God's family. Those who are truly faithful are content to "wait for the hope of righteous." As Paul states in verse 6, in the long run circumcision counts for nothing.
- f) Verse 6 uses the expression, "faith working through love." For Paul, faith cannot remain silent; it must be expressed in a life of loving service. A crucial element of faith is obedient service in the name of love. You will need to excuse my references to Henri Nouwen, I am currently involved in writing about him. In his most popular book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri spoke of our acceptance as the beloved embraced by the father. There are many people who struggle with the issue of whether they are worthy of being loved. But Henri insists that the truth of the parable is only grasped when we realize we are called not just to be the beloved, but we are also called to be like God and behave as the loving father. The parable calls us to be the lover as well as the beloved. If we have profoundly experienced the love of Christ, we must then share that same love with others.

### 3) Galatians 5:7-12 – Things Were Going Well, What Happened?

- a) Paul now addresses the Galatians directly, remembering their initial positive response to the gospel. He wonders how they could so easily be misled. It is certainly not God's

doing that has led them astray. Paul's fear is that these few renegade preachers will infect the entire church with a false gospel. He regards the possibility of losing the entire Galatian Christian community with horror, reacting with vehemence and anger against those preaching the necessity of circumcision. Yet Paul speaks with confidence concerning the Galatians that they will respond once again in a positive fashion to his appeals. Paul has not given up on the Christians of Galatian.

- b) Paul unleashes the full fury of his angry words on the false teachers promoting circumcision when he writes in verse 10, "whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty." He ends his judgmental tirade in verse 12 by yelling at his opponents, if you're going to insist on circumcision, why don't you go all the way and castrate yourselves." As a well-trained Jewish scholar, Paul is aware that castration is regarded by the Torah (Deut.23:1) as a cause for excommunication. Paul is expressing his disgust that these mutilators of the flesh seeking to ensure their inclusion in the family of God are instead showing that they will be completely excluded. Paul seems to approve of that idea.
- c) In verse 11 Paul responds to some in the church who argued that Paul earlier in his life advocated circumcision and some who incorrectly argued that he still supported such a practice. Paul defends himself against these false charges by pointing to the central focus of his faith: the cross. The scandalous death of Jesus Christ make circumcision or any other human act entirely unnecessary. It would not be possible for Paul to hold onto the cross while insisting on the necessity of any other avenue to salvation. Paul speaks of "the offense of the cross" and the "scandal of the cross." Why is the cross a stumbling-block? It is because the idea of a crucified Messiah is a contradiction in terms for many Jews. It was inconceivable that God's anointed messenger should die in such a shameful way. But for Paul, the very means of Christ's death demonstrated the power of God's love bringing salvation to all. The resurrection of Christ in no way removed the scandal of his death. Rather it confirmed the irrational truth that power is to be found in weakness and eternal glory is to be found in a painful and sacrificial death. It is interesting to ask the question of ways in which the modern-day church has attempted to remove the scandal of the cross as the centerpiece of its message for the world.

#### Questions for Consideration:

1. In what ways does River Road Church fulfill its calling to Christian freedom by setting others free? In what ways can we as individuals better fulfill our calling of helping others to a life of freedom?

2. In what ways does the church today seek to hide the scandal of the cross as we present the gospel to the world? Is sacrificial service still widely recognized as a virtue in our society?

3. Do you have a difficult time believing that you are God's beloved child? Do you have a difficult time believing that you are called to be like God as you offer love to others?