

STANDING FIRM AGAINST LEGALISM GALATIANS 5:1-12

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I cannot think of anyone else who tried harder to win God's approval and acceptance than Martin. He came from a religious family. He was also a very smart guy. He got his Master's degree by the time he was only 21. In order to please his father he went to law school. One day when he was returning home during a break, he got caught in a thunderstorm. He had what some might describe as a near death experience. Lightning struck next to him, and he was knocked to the ground. In abject terror he cried out, "Help me, Saint Anne!" In the Catholic Church she is regarded as the mother of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Then Martin declared, "I will become a monk!"

As some of you might recognize, this was Martin Luther. Martin Luther followed through on his vow and joined the order of the Augustinian monks. As a monk in training he carefully observed all of the strict discipline required of him. He went beyond that to do more. Besides the prayers and singing and fasting and religious study, he spent much time in confession. On one occasion he spent six hours straight confessing his sins to his priest confessor. It almost drove that guy crazy.

Still Luther felt guilty and unworthy. He tried to punish himself to bring relief. He would sleep in the cold without a blanket. He would literally whip himself. Yet he still sensed that he fell far short of God's holiness.

An opportunity came along for Luther to go to Rome with some other monks. He hoped that this trip might provide some kind of spiritual relief. When he arrived at this center of the Catholic faith, he went about doing all of the religious good deeds which he could think of. He visited several churches. He went to the graves of famous saints of the faith. He performed acts of penance. Yet he came away disappointed and even disillusioned.

According to a famous church historian by the name of Philip Schaff, Martin Luther was **"shocked by the unbelief, levity and immorality of the clergy. Money and luxurious living seemed to have replaced apostolic poverty and self-denial. He saw nothing but worldly splendor at the court of [the] Pope..., [and] he heard of the fearful crimes of [previous popes], which were hardly known and believed in Germany, but freely spoken of as undoubted facts in the fresh remembrance of all Romans."** (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, VI:129)

So he returned to Wittenburg, the city to which he had been assigned, without having found the spiritual relief which he had been seeking. In his study of the Bible Martin Luther became fixated on one verse in the New Testament Book of Romans. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 1:17) It was Romans #1 v. 17, which reads, **"For in it**

[the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

Despite his best efforts Martin Luther did not feel righteous. He was plagued by this realization. He was a priest of the church, but he felt condemned. How can I be right with God?

(PROJECTOR OFF) Some in our world are concerned with such things. This was a key issue in the Book of Galatians, which we have been studying. How do we become right with God? Is the key thing to follow rules, or to develop a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus? Has the price been paid, or do we need to pay it, or at least contribute to it?

Last week we saw at the end of #4 that the Apostle Paul used a complicated illustration from the Old Testament to show the contrast between law and grace. (GALATIANS 4 CHART) God had promised Abraham that He would make of him a great nation. But Abraham did not have any kids. In his old age Abraham and Sarah decided that they needed to help God out. So they deferred to the custom of the day and provided the slave girl Hagar to Abraham to provide the promised child. The product of that union was Ishmael. God later provided the son whom He promised to Sarah, who was Isaac.

So Paul in these two lines of descendants saw a lesson. Ishmael was the result of a natural birth. The birth was to a slave woman. He further drew a connection with the law handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai. The other line was marked by God's supernatural intervention. Isaac's line was characterized by promise and faith and grace. The challenge to the Galatians and to us is to decide which model we want to follow.

I.

So in the first six verses of #5 we learn that **STANDING FIRM MEANS RESISTING THE SLAVERY OF LEGALISM**. Paul proclaims in v. 1: **"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** This verse could serve as a one sentence summary of the message of Galatians. It also serves as a kind of hinge verse. It summarizes the point that Paul just made in his Old Testament illustration. Christians should seek and enjoy freedom, and they should avoid legalism--- a law and works-based approach to a relationship with God.

I argued last week that real freedom comes from living according to the way that God intended for us to live. He has graciously supplied us with an owner's manual, which gives us instructions about how to do that. The foundation of this right way to live involves the gospel. The gospel says that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross. Our responsibility is to simply believe in Him. Salvation is a gift. There is nothing that we can do to earn it. He paid the price. Our responsibility is to accept it.

The problem confronting the Galatians was that Jews came along who claimed to be followers of Jesus who said that these Galatians needed to not only believe in Jesus but

also become Jewish. They had to follow the Mosaic Law and all of the rules which the rabbis had added to it. Paul says that this is unnecessary. He calls it a yoke of slavery.

The term “yoke” has positive and negative connotations in the New Testament. (MATTHEW 11:29-30) Jesus told those listening to Him in Matthew #11 vv. 29 & 30, **“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”** But here in our verse it has a negative connotation. It is associated with slavery, which term Paul is using to describe adherence to the Jewish law.

In v. 2 Paul says (PROJECTOR OFF), **“Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.”** So by “yoke of slavery” in v. 1 Paul is clearly referring to submission to Jewish law. For circumcision was the key identifying mark of commitment to Judaism. For Galatian Gentiles who had come to trust in Jesus, and who had experienced forgiveness of sins and justification, such a commitment would be an acknowledgment that they were not yet fully accepted by God. Acceptance and righteousness are still to be earned.

The true Gospel says that Jesus in His death provided the way of salvation. He is the source of righteousness. So in turning to this Jewish law deal Christians would be cutting themselves off from Jesus and the benefits which He offers.

These false teachers, these Judaizers, want to add on to the gospel. They are saying that righteousness can be attained by belief in Jesus and by following the law. This has often been a problem in the history of Christianity. People have come along and said that we need Jesus and the teachings of Joseph Smith. We need Jesus and the teaching of Mary Baker Eddy. We need Jesus and the teachings of Ellen White. Paul is saying that it is faith in Jesus alone which produces salvation.

Paul adds in v. 3, **“I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.”** If you are buying into this Jewish law deal, make sure that you read the fine print. The Judaizers have accused Paul of not telling the whole story--- that to be right with God one must not only believe in Jesus but also follow the Jewish law. Paul is reversing that. He was trained as a rabbi. So he was very familiar with all of the detailed Jewish rules and traditions and observances. He regarded the whole system as a kind of slavery. So he is warning the Galatians about what it is to which they are committing.

Reference is made in the Book of Acts to the fact that Paul had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. His son Gamaliel II was also quite famous. In a comment in the Jewish Talmud he says, **“Only he who keeps all these commandments will live, not he who keeps only one of them.”** (b.Sah. 81a) This is consistent with what James wrote in his New Testament epistle. (PROJECTOR ON--- JAMES 2:10) In James #2 v. 10 he writes, **“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.”**

In # 3 of our letter Paul quoted the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. (DEUTERONOMY 27:26) In #27 v. 26 Moses tells his people, **“Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”** Paul interprets this in #3 to mean that people are responsible to follow all of the laws of Moses.

But Paul’s argument is that this Old Testament law was not intended to provide the way of salvation. It was provided as a way to worship God and to follow Him. (PROJECTOR OFF) It was intended to teach people about the holiness of God. It was intended to show them the need for a Savior. But as we have seen Paul refer to Abraham and his example, it was faith in God that resulted in justification. **“And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”**

Verse 4 in our text says, **“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”** This is a key verse which is used by Christians who claim that believers can lose their salvation. One can mess up so badly or deny Jesus such that this person can lose their forgiveness, can lose their gift of eternal life.

The first observation which I would make is that Paul is not talking about what we might regard as a big moral sin here. He is not talking about a situation of denying Jesus. He is talking about turning to dependence upon law and legalism.

The second thing which we should notice is that Paul is speaking about people who have fallen from grace, not from salvation. Grace is the instrumentality of salvation. It is not salvation itself. Consider Ephesians #2 vv. 8-9. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9) The Bible says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

Paul explains that grace is the method, or instrumentality, of salvation. The end result of grace working with faith is salvation. Good works do not produce salvation. It is not following laws and rules and doing good things that gets anyone to heaven.

People, like the Galatians, who are tempted to focus on following rules to win God’s favor are turning away from grace and from Jesus, who is the source of power for living the Christian life. This does not mean that Christians who get messed up by falling into legalism or who do bad things lose their salvation. That cannot happen.

The Apostle John wrote in his first epistle (1 JOHN 5:11-12) in #1 vv. 11-12, **“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”** John was writing these words to Christians. He assures them, and he assures us, that we have eternal life because we have believed in Jesus. We have welcomed Him into our lives. If something could happen whereby we could lose this

eternal life, than it was never eternal life in the first place. It was only probationary life, or provisional life. It was not eternal. Eternal life by its very definition is unending.

(1 JOHN 5:13) The Apostle adds in v. 13 of 1 John #5, **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”** If something could happen to take this eternal life away from us, it would be impossible for us to know that we have eternal life. In effect to imagine the possibility of losing this eternal life would also mean that we have to maintain a certain level of conduct in order to keep it. There are some things which we would be required to avoid. In other words, we have to be deserving enough. But that is completely contrary to the Gospel. The Gospel is that we are totally undeserving. Salvation is a gift of grace. All we can do is accept it or reject it. If we accept it, we are in. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Think about some of the heroes of the Bible: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David. They all had major screw ups in their lives. What was necessary for them to be restored to a proper relationship with God? Was it closer adherence to the law, or was it grace? Think about Peter. He was perhaps the boldest disciple of Jesus. Yet at a crucial moment Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. What was his recourse? Closer adherence to the law? The only remedy for that situation was grace. Because Jesus forgave Peter, and Peter accepted that forgiveness, his relationship was restored. That is what we need. We need grace and forgiveness which only Christ can provide. We need faith in Jesus to live the life which He wants us to live.

Paul continues in v. 5, **“For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.”** Back in #3 we saw that Paul pointed to the example of Abraham who was reckoned as righteous as a result of his faith in God. He says likewise that Christians have been declared as righteous as a result of their faith in Christ.

So we can claim a certain righteousness now. But we live in a world where righteousness is often missing and where God’s people are often victims of unrighteousness. We have been promised, however, that Jesus will return to earth. When He does that, there will be a public vindication of His people for all the world to see. Jesus will establish His earthly kingdom, and righteousness will finally prevail upon the earth.

Paul concludes this part of our passage in v. 6: **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”** In this church deal which has been created our status as Jews or Gentiles does not matter. We don’t need to be motivated by a desire to earn God’s favor. Legalism is not the way to go. A realization that we have already been accepted by a loving Heavenly Father should motivate us to respond by faith in Him and by love toward Him and toward other people. Thus we are to stand firm and to resist the slavery of legalism.

II.

In vv. 7-12 we find that **STANDING FIRM MEANS REJECTING FALSE TEACHERS.** (PROJECTOR ON--- II. STANDING FIRM MEANS....) The Apostle tells the Galatians in v. 7: **“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”**

The New Testament writers on several occasions compare the Christian life to a foot race. Here Paul says that the Galatians were running well, but somebody interfered with them and forced them off of the right path.

I appreciate that imagery. I have been a runner for all of my adult life. It is part of my regular routine. I do it for the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits which it gives to me. I have only run in a competitive race once. About eight years ago the church custodian asked me to run in a race that was being held to honor his granddaughter who was tragically killed in a gun accident. It was hard to say “no.”

So I ran in this race involving 250 people. About two-thirds of the way through the course, I came across some slower runners who didn’t move out of the path. So I had to go off the path to get around them, and I stumbled and fell. I scraped up my legs and sprained my ankle. It kind of messed me up. I did manage to get up, get back on the track, finish the race. and come in first in my age group.

In the Biblical context it was legalists who were trying to force the Galatian Christians off of the path. They, likewise, were in danger of falling. Today there are people claiming to be Christians who try to influence Christians to submit to a system of rules and good works in an effort to please God. Of course there are other influencers in our world who make promises about where we can find pleasure and fulfillment and happiness. Then we all still have a sin nature which tempts us to get off the right path.

Verse 8: **“This persuasion is not from him who calls you.”** These Judaizers may well have been nice people. They may have been smart. They may have been good talkers. Certainly they were religious. But the issue is truth. If people are trying to persuade us with a message which is not true, if it is contrary to the Gospel, if it is against what God has told us, then it is ultimately from the evil one.

(2 CORINTHIANS 11:14) In 2 Corinthians #11 v. 14 Paul wrote, **“And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”** Wrong ideas and false teachers can be persuasive. But we have to figure out what is true and what is consistent with the revelation which God has given us.

In v. 9 Paul (PROJECTOR OFF) cites a proverb probably familiar to his audience: **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”** Such is the power of yeast. In the New Testament this saying appears several times. Sometimes it has a positive connotation. Here it has a negative connotation. The point is that a little negative teaching can mess up lots of Christians. The false teaching here involves legalism. If Paul was living today, he might have used an illustration involving a computer virus or malware.

Paul continues in v. 10: **“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.”** The apostle’s confidence is ultimately in the Lord. If Jesus is in these Galatians, He will ultimately lead them into the truth. He may use people like Paul to do it. He may use some of us to keep other Christians on track.

In Philippians #1 v. 6 (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 1:6) Paul says this about the Christians in Philippi: **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** Such is the idea he seems to have in mind here.

Previously Paul has referred to the false teachers in the plural. Whether he has in mind one person in particular here or a generic opponent--- anyone who is troubling the Galatians, we don’t know. But this opponent or opponents are faced with divine judgment. Probably he is referring to significant eternal consequences that will come from trying to lead God’s people astray. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 11: **“But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.”** The apparent charge from the Judaizers is that Paul encourages the men in some audiences to be circumcised. Perhaps he is accused of saying this to Gentiles who attend Jewish synagogues and are considering conversion to Judaism. These false teachers are saying that Paul told Gentiles only part of the story. He only told them about Jesus. But in addition to that Gentile Christians need to follow the Law of Moses.

Paul counters this by referring to the persecution which he has received at the hands of the Jews. Acts #14 tells us that when he was in Lystra in Galatia, a Jewish mob nabbed him and stoned him, almost to the point of death.

Paul also says in v. 11 that if the route to winning God’s acceptance requires circumcision and following the Law of Moses, then there was no need for Jesus to be crucified. The idea of a crucified Messiah was indeed offensive to the Jews. They were looking for a Messiah who would be a conquering hero who would rid them of the Romans. They didn’t want a Messiah who would die on a cross at the hands of the Romans.

Finally, in v. 12, Paul makes a sarcastic remark. He says, **“I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”** In other words, if circumcision is such a great thing, don’t stop there. Cut off the whole thing.

His basic point is that the Galatian Christians should stand firm against the legalizers, against those who want to put them under some kind of merit system, a religion that focuses on rules and works which are needed to win God’s approval. This would include most all religions of the world, except for genuine Christianity.

Martin Luther (PROJECTOR ON--- MARTIN LUTHER) was very much involved in such a rules-based religious system. It claimed to be Christian. But like the Judaism of the first century it was dominated by rules and rituals and religious duties and feast days that had to be observed in particular ways. Martin Luther was more religious than all of the monks around him. But he had no peace. He felt exasperated. He felt condemned.

He was sent to teach theology at a new university at Wittenberg in Germany. There he was tasked with teaching the Book of Romans. That verse in Romans #1 about righteousness and faith haunted him. According to his own testimony, **“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love... Yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.... Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless I beat importunately upon St. Paul at that place (Romans 1:17) most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.”** (*Luther's Works* 34:336)

It was at that place where all great thinking is accomplished that Luther suddenly understood and believed. He was sitting on the toilet. He later wrote, **“At last by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word ‘Righteousness of God.’ Thus this place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.”** (*Ibid*, 34:337) So it was that Martin Luther recognized that salvation is a gift received only by faith in Jesus. The righteousness of God is applied to our account simply as a result of trusting in Jesus.

That simple gospel is likewise available to all of us today. We humans are so inclined to gravitate toward legalism, toward thinking that we have to earn our way into God's good graces, that we have to be good enough to be accepted by God, that we have to do some kind of penance for the bad things which we have done. But the Gospel is that we are never going to be good enough. We can never earn our way to heaven. But fortunately Jesus was good in our place. He paid the penalty for our sins. Our only responsibility is to put our trust in Jesus to receive forgiveness and the gift of eternal life.