

# Clinging to Freedom

*Galatians 5:1-6*

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
[branchofhope@juno.com](mailto:branchofhope@juno.com)  
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**Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. <sup>2</sup> Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. <sup>3</sup> And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You have become estranged from Christ, you who *attempt to* be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. <sup>5</sup> For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. <sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.**

## **Preface**

This morning we will pay particular attention to: 1) Freedom in Christ – what does it mean to be free in Christ? When Jesus said, “the truth shall set you free” from what have we been set free? 2) Falling from grace – what does it mean to fall from God’s grace? Does this mean we should fear losing our salvation? 3) The hope of righteousness – don’t we already have righteousness as Christians? And what does it mean to hope that we get it? 4) Working faith – what does genuine, justifying faith look like?

## **Freedom in Christ**

**Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1).**

Regarding the great freedom, of which Paul writes in the beginning of this fifth chapter, Calvin passionately expounds,

**After having told them that they are the *children of the free woman*, he now reminds them that they ought not lightly to despise a freedom so precious. And certainly it is an invaluable blessing, in defense of which it is our duty to fight, even to death; since not only the highest temporal considerations, but our eternal interests also, animate us to the contest. Many persons, having never viewed the subject in this light, charge us with excessive zeal, when they see us so warmly and earnestly contending for freedom of faith as to outward matters, in opposition to the tyranny of the Pope. Under this cloak, our adversaries raise a prejudice against us among ignorant people, as if the whole object of our pursuit were licentiousness, which is the relaxation of all discipline.**

**But wise and skillful persons are aware that this is one of the most important doctrines connected with salvation. This is not a question whether you shall eat this or that food, whether you shall observe or neglect a particular day, (which is the foolish notion entertained by many, and the slander uttered by some,) but what is your positive duty before God, what is necessary to salvation, and what cannot be omitted without sin. In short, the controversy relates to the liberty of conscience, when placed before the tribunal of God!<sup>1</sup>**

## **Freedom From...**

What is this freedom? What is freedom in Christ? From what does the truth set us free? It consists of freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law and the curse of the moral law; freedom from the power of sin and its complete domination of your life and destiny (Romans 6:18); freedom from an accusing conscience (Hebrews 10:22); freedom from the wrath of God (Romans 5:1); and freedom from the tyranny of Satan (2 Timothy 2:25, 26). Paul's concern for the Galatians is that they had been set free merely to be trapped in another cage. These are always cages.

## **A Tempting Freedom**

As we embark into the fifth chapter of Galatians, a chapter which will begin to address how we ought to behave in light of the four previous chapters, Paul will emphasize that our behavior should proceed from a spirit of freedom. So great the freedom and so emphatic is Paul in proclaiming this freedom that he anticipates the temptation to use this freedom unwisely, even sinfully. Thus later in this chapter he will write,

**For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13).**

## **The Tool of Freedom**

Before we speak of loving one another, Paul wishes to make one thing very clear – this liberty should never be abandoned, compromised, nor improperly used – even for the sake of piety. Preach the law? Yes! Preach fortitude? Yes! Preach humility, patience, discipline, selflessness, compassion, temperance, purity, and religious devotion? Yes and yes! May holiness be preached with zeal and fervor!

But freedom should not be used as a tool; never hang the carrot of justification between the saint and his obtaining of virtue. For once you have proposed that favor

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 5:1). Ages Software: Albany, OR

with God is found by virtue of virtue, freedom in Christ has been lost. And when freedom in Christ is lost, all other battles are lost as well.

## **Skillful Parenting**

It takes skillful parenting to express displeasure at a child's behavior while at the same time maintaining security in their little hearts as to your parental love and faithfulness. A parent takes an even deeper breath when they express God's displeasure at their child's behavior. For even the young child is acquainted with heaven and hell. Little ones often wish to know the level of punishment in order to do a cost analysis of disobedience. How hard for their tender minds to avoid feeling that you're hanging the threat of hell before them until their juvenile impiety passes muster.

## **God's Effective Love**

Of course we do not hang the threat of abandonment before our children. Nor does God hang the threat of hell before His children (1 John 4:18). As Calvin stated, we have a liberty of conscience before the tribunal of God. We love our children trusting they will learn to love; we hope we'll be effective at this. How much more effective is God who loves us first that we might love in return? Irresistibly effective, no doubt.

## **Partial Freedom?**

**Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. <sup>3</sup>And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. (Galatians 5:2, 3).**

William Hendriksen states that "Man's faith rests entirely on Christ or not at all...[a] Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted."<sup>2</sup> In reading this epistle you might think that Paul had a serious problem with circumcision. He didn't. He circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). The problem Paul had was placing circumcision, or any human behavior, next to Christ on the cross. In doing so, you have removed Christ from the equation of salvation—you have brought Him down (Romans 10:6). In short, believe in Christ alone or your hope is in keeping the law alone. This, my friends, is a recipe for disaster.

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<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Galatians and Ephesians* (Baker Book House, 1990), p. 195.

## Falling From Grace

**You have become estranged from Christ, you who *attempt to be justified by law*; you have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).**

What do we make of such a passage? What does it mean to fall from grace? Is it, as some would have us believe, that Christ had quickened a dead soul merely to have it die again? Then we hope Christ saves him once again merely for him to perhaps once again commit soteriological (regarding salvation) suicide. Spurgeon comments on this type of understanding of the passage:

**As for that sandy gospel, which lets you fall away and then come back again, it is the wickedest falsehood on earth. If I believed it, I would preach the gospel and be holy on the Sunday, and fall away on the Monday, and be a Christian again on the Tuesday, and I should say, "I'll have fallen from grace and have got up again." But now, as a true Calvinistic Christian, I desire to have in myself, and see in others, a life of constant consistency, nor can I think it possible to fall away and then return, after the many passages which assert the impossibility of such a thing.<sup>3</sup>**

Do we think Christ saves us then wishes us luck? Does he leave us to persevere by virtue of our own intestinal fortitude? Did He merely acquit us? Has He not also adopted us? Is He that poor of a shepherd? Who would trust their own children to such a feeble custodian?

Not only would this be an indictment against the power and grace of Christ, it would make the Scriptures untrustworthy. For how many passages are there which assign the power of our salvation—from election to glory—to the power of Christ (Romans 8:29, 30)? If this were Paul's meaning, his theology would differ very little from the false apostles of Galatia.

### General and Specific

There are at least two other ways to understand this verse—ways which nicely comply with the rest of Scripture while maintaining the spirit of Paul's warning.

In a general sense this is a warning to a church. Churches which allow false doctrines to slither in unchallenged may find that, in time, they are no longer churches at all—Christ removes the lampstand (Revelation 2:5). It is with utter disregard for the souls of our spiritual descendants that we say, "we are all saved, let us not trouble ourselves with annoying doctrines."

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<sup>3</sup>Spurgeon, C. H. 1998. Spurgeon's Sermons: Volume 1 (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Spurgeon's Sermons. Vol. 1. Ages Software: Albany, OR

In a specific sense this, like other warning passages in Scripture, are the means by which God preserves His children. In the same way the elect hear the gospel and respond; the justified hear the warning and take heed.

## The Hope of Righteousness

**For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith (Galatians 5:5).**

### Heaven

The righteousness refers to that first day in heaven which follows our last day on earth—when all the tears and pain and sorrow have passed—when there is only peace and peace everlasting—eternal contentment and happiness.

**Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8, 9).**

### Hope

The hope is not the hope in the way we often use the word. We're not doing our best and hoping it all works out. The hope is a sure expectation of a yet future or invisible event.

### Sealed

The reason we do not abandon this sure expectation is because we have been sealed in it, not by our own fortitude, but by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

## Working Faith

**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).**

Paul will soon launch into God's calling in our lives—a calling to a life of obedience and love. In this verse he shows the order. True, God-given faith, after justification, will always produce love. As Luther said, "**We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.**" Or as James wrote,

**What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can (that kind of) faith save him (James 2:14—parenthesis mine)?**

## Knowledge, Assent, and Trust

Here is where serious introspection must take place. Paul writes, “**Examine yourselves *as to whether you are in the faith***” (2 Corinthians 13:5). He doesn’t tell us to examine whether we are good enough. He asks us to examine whether we are in the faith. Genuine faith includes knowledge, assent, and trust; you know what you believe, you agree that it is true, and then you appropriate it – you make it yours. For although justifying faith is a free gift and passive – like waking up – the love we are called to can be hard work and very active.

Do you wish to know if you’re in God’s good favor? Circumcision or uncircumcision means nothing. The question is do you have faith? And is it the kind of faith which produces love? Paul will write more on this as the chapter continues.

## Questions for Study

1. Discuss freedom in Christ. What is included? What isn't included (pages 1, 2)?
2. What did Paul fear Christians would do with this freedom (page 2)?
3. How can we be tempted to use freedom as a tool (page 2)?
4. Under what circumstances does Christ profit people nothing (page 3)?
5. In what respects can people fall from grace (page 4)?
6. What is the hope of righteousness (page 5)?
7. What does saving faith look like (page 6)?