

Galatians Chapter 5 v 1 - 15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 May 2020

Preacher: Joel Metcalfe

- [0 : 0 0] And if you cast your minds back to last week, you remember that Frederick spoke about two covenants. One was the covenant of Mount Sinai, and that was the covenant of the law, which said that by doing these things, you will be saved.
- By following these laws, you'll have a right standing before God. And a symbol of that was Abraham's child that he had through his slave woman, Hagar.
- And that was him trying to achieve the promises of God in his own strength. And that wasn't the child on whom the promises rested. And so all of that came to nothing.
- But there was another child that Abraham had, and that was with Sarah. And this typified the covenant of grace. And the covenant of grace says this, that Christ has achieved it all for us on the cross.
- We don't have to do a single thing to earn a right standing before God. We simply trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Now, we've been reading through the book of Galatians.
- [1 : 0 1] And the problem with the church of Galatia was that they were a church. They're under the covenant of grace. They've been saved. But there have been false teachers who have come in and said, No, it's not just by grace, but you have to go back to the Jewish law.
- You have to go back under that yoke. That covenant, which Paul says is a covenant of slavery, the covenant of the law. And they're tempted to go back.
- Now, it reminds me of this story in the book of Numbers. And we studied this last year. And this is in Numbers chapter 11. And the Israelites have been rescued from slavery in Egypt.
- And they're in the desert. And they're hungry. And they start to complain. And they start to look back on their life in Egypt with rose-tinted glasses. And they say things like, In Egypt, we had cucumbers.
- And we had melons. We had all this amazing food. I wish that we were back there in Egypt. No, it's a serious thing that they're doing before God.
- [2 : 0 3] They're grumbling before God, who's just saved them in this miraculous way. He's part of the Red Sea. But in one sense, I find the story quite funny. Because you think about who they were in Egypt.
- Well, they'd been slaves for 400 years. They'd built this amazing nation of Egypt. They'd made them a strong nation, all on the back of slavery. They'd been beaten with rods.
- They'd been treated awfully. Their children had been thrown into the sea so that there wouldn't be an uprising. They were treated badly as slaves under Pharaoh.
- And yet they look back and they say, Yeah, but those cucumbers, they were pretty delicious. All those melons. I wish I was back in Egypt as a slave. Because the food was so much better.
- Now, obviously, that's pretty stupid. But I think, actually, we could all be like that as Christians. We can look back. Or we can look at other people's lives. And, you know, there's the saying, The grass is greener on the other side.

[3 : 05] We can be jealous in some ways of other people's lives. And we know that that's a stupid thing for the Israelites to say. But that's exactly what the Galatians are going through in this story.

They've been set free. They've been saved by Jesus. And they have a relationship with God. But these Judaizers come in and they say, No, but you must follow the law.

And they're tempted. And they want to follow these Jewish laws. And they want to add these laws on top of this grace that they've been given. And so Paul says these words in verse 1.

So they're tempted to go back under the law and to put this yoke upon themselves.

It's a yoke of slavery. And that's the temptation for them. What's this freedom that Paul speaks of? What's this freedom that we stand in as Christians?

[4 : 09] Well, it's not primarily a freedom from sin. But actually he's speaking of freedom from the law. And freedom from the guilt of sin, which the law brings. Which is trying to attain our own righteousness, our own right standing before God.

By doing good works, by doing good deeds, by following a written law. And trying to earn our salvation before God. And the thing is, we're human beings and we're flawed and we're sinful.

And any attempt by us to try and attain a righteousness, it's not going to go well. And all it does is it yokes us under slavery and it puts a burden that we can't lift.

Because we're sinful beings, we fall short of the grace of God. We fall short of his glory. I didn't mean to say grace, I meant to say glory. So that's the freedom he's speaking of.

It's freedom from trying to strive at our own strength to have a right standing before God. And now you might think of the Galatian church and you might be thinking, what's so attractive to them about going under the law?

[5 : 14] You know, being circumcised, not being able to eat bacon, having to follow all these, it's like 600 rules. You know, what's so attractive about doing that?

It's not something that we probably struggle with, you know, going back under the Old Testament laws. And it's a strange thing. But actually, there are three traps that I want to bring out in this text that they have fallen into, which I think also apply to us today.

Although maybe in a different sense. So the first trap that they've fallen into is this. They're adding to grace. They're adding something on top of the salvation by grace that they've received.

And they say, yeah, I've been saved by grace, but it's grace plus I have to do this. I have to be circumcised. I have to follow the Jewish law. And he says this in verse two.

Mark my words. So why is this faulty thinking?

[6 : 29] What is this trap that they've fallen into? Well, the truth is this. If they want to say, I'm going to earn something before God, I'm going to achieve just a smidgen of my salvation.

And then they have to keep every law. They have to earn the whole thing. You can't have it both ways. You can't be saved by grace as a gift from God and trying to earn your own salvation on top.

If you're going to put a burden on yourself, then you have to be perfect. You have to obey every law. You have to meet every standard. And that's a weight that's going to crush you.

It's impossible. And so he uses this phrase, you've fallen from grace. Now, that's a phrase you've probably heard, but probably not in that context.

But that's where the phrase originally comes from. We often use it of someone maybe who's fallen into great moral sin. You know, maybe someone who's fallen into adultery or done something really awful.

[7 : 28] You say, oh, they've fallen from grace. They were this good person. They were this good, upstanding citizen. But they've done this thing. They've fallen from grace. But actually, that's not what Paul's saying.

He's not using it as someone who's done an outward, horrible thing in the eyes of the world. But actually, he's saying it about the religious. He's saying it about those who want to add more laws.

He's saying, he says this in verse 4. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen away from grace.

So what does that phrase mean, fallen away from grace? Well, you've been saved by grace. You know, you got that at the beginning. But you've fallen away from the right way of thinking.

You're no longer resting in Christ's death for you. You're no longer accepting that free gift. You're no longer trusting in Christ alone for your salvation. But you're trying to, in some way, earn it yourself.

[8 : 27] You're trying to add something on top. So the first problem they've fallen into is adding to grace. And actually, we've looked at that a lot, haven't we, over the last few weeks. So I only really wanted to go through that briefly.

But what does this freedom bring to us? How does resting in the grace of God bring freedom?

Well, it saves us from, you know, the treadmill of performance-based living. You know, if we add works to our salvation, if you say you have to do this on top of the grace you've received.

If you say you want to be a really good Christian. If you want to really have a good relationship with God, you've got to do this. You've got to, I don't know, wear a suit. You've got to say your prayers three times a day.

You know, all, nothing wrong with any of those things. But if you make those things a law, then you're just putting yourself on a treadmill. And you're going to have no peace before God.

[9 : 31] Because you're always, you're always going to fail at some point. And you're always going to be striving. So we can only have true rest. We can only have true peace when we grasp that we're saved by grace alone.

There's nothing we can do to add to our salvation. And therefore, there's nothing we can do to lose our salvation. Because it's all of Christ. He's earned it on our behalf. That's good news. And that brings freedom.

That should cause you to rejoice. Well, what's the second trap? The second trap is this. If the first one was adding to grace, the second one is acclimatizing to culture.

And so rather than being willing to stand out for what you believe, for the truth of the gospel, for the truth of God's word, rather you let culture define what God's word says.

We can all have a temptation to twist the truth of God's word and to make it a bit more like those around us, a bit more like the culture. Because we don't want to stand out.

[10 : 30] We don't want to make enemies. That's what we like as human beings. We don't like to put our head above the parapet, as it were. And that was the problem that Galatians were having.

So in verse 11, it says this. Paul says this. Brothers and sisters, if I'm still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.

And so these Judaizers, these Jewish believers, they were offended that their culture for hundreds of years, this Torah, this law, all of these things that their forefathers were following.

You know, rightfully, that's what God wanted them to do. But they're offended that these new believers, these new Gentile believers, don't have to follow this law.

They're saying we're saved just by the merit of Christ's work on the cross. That was an offense to the culture. And so the pressure was for them to cave in, to cave in and revert to the Jewish law.

[11 : 40] So you see in chapter 6, verse 12, at the end of the book of Galatians, he says this. Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised.

The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. And so in order to fit in with the Jews, with the culture of the day, these Judaizers were trying to add the Jewish law on top of salvation by grace.

Now, what about us in our culture today? Because I don't think for many of us that that's the temptation. You know, maybe for an Orthodox Jew or for a Muslim, giving up, they might understand that, you know, for giving up these religious laws that their family has followed.

In one way, it's viewed as a betrayal. It's viewed as a turning back on their culture. And that can be a real struggle for people from that sort of background when they become believers. But actually, for us in a Western context, that's not usually the problem, is it?

But there are all kinds of cultural pressures on the church and on us as individuals. And which go completely against the Bible and completely against the culture. And I think in different ways, we can still have the same temptation today to cave in and to twist the scriptures, to try put what the culture says and read them into the scriptures rather than letting the scriptures determine how we live and determine our thinking.

[13 : 16] Rather, we try and shape our thinking to the ways of the world. And so what are some of these ways that perhaps we're pressured to conform to society's views?

Well, you can probably think of many things, but just a few. Maybe society's views on gender, on sexuality, on the roles of men and women in the church, of eternal judgment, of sin, words like sin, of hell.

You know, these are all uncomfortable things to say. And maybe as you're listening to those words, you feel a bit uncomfortable because they're so foreign to the culture that we live in. And the pressure can be for us to, you know, try and read something else into the scripture and try and placate ourselves, try and acclimatize, try and assimilate with the culture around us and try and water down the message of the cross.

And what about Paul's words, the offense of the cross? What about that in itself? Because the cross is offensive. The cross, it speaks of a God who judges sin, a God of wrath, you know, a God who cannot have sin in his presence.

It says that we as human beings are sinners, that we're deserving of the wrath of God. And actually, even today, people, you get this in every generation throughout the history of the church, but people will try and water down the message of the cross.

[14 : 52] And they will say, no, it's merely a symbol of God's love for the world. But they do away with the core of its meaning, which is it was a sacrifice, that Jesus was the sacrifice in our place for our sin on our behalf.

And that he took the wrath of God, that God is angry at sin. And he bore that on his own body on the tree. These are foreign things to our culture.

But if we water down the message of the gospel, if we water down the Bible, you know, we might think that we'll attract more people into the church.

But the reality is that we strip the gospel of any of its power to change the culture and to change us. We strip the word of its power and of its meaning.

And the word will always be different to the culture around us. And as Christians, we'll always be called to believe different things to the culture around us. But we're not to conform to the ways of the world.

[15 : 53] We're to allow the scripture, we're to allow the word of God to shape our own thoughts and our own minds. We have to read God's word with honesty. So that's the second trap, acclimatizing to the culture, assimilating with the culture.

And so the final trap that I want to speak of is assuming the worst. Now, what do I mean by that? I don't think it actually is the best title, but I'm trying to make them all begin with A so you can see where I'm coming from.

But I think that the most common objection to salvation by grace is the idea that, you know, if we're merely saved by grace, if it's just a gift of God and I don't have to do anything to add to it, to achieve a right standing before God, then I'll just do what I want.

I'll just live like the world. Where's my motivation to serve God, to follow him and to live a good life, to be a good person? You know, I'm not going to do that if I'm not made to, if there's no law.

That's the common objection. So the lie that they believed is believing that we must add to the law to stop ourselves from falling into the opposite trap of lawlessness.

[17 : 06] Paul describes this as indulging in the flesh in verse 13. Now, I want to spend a bit more time on this last point and just unpack how that's really faulty thinking.

Because the law has no power to change us as people. So what are we really saying if we're saying that we need law to change ourselves? Well, we're saying that unless we have these external rules and unless we have this fear that if we don't follow these rules, then God will judge us, then I'm not going to change.

I'm going to live how I want. But what's a person who's, you know, who's following those rules only because of a fear of judgment?

You know, are they really a changed person? Well, no, the transformation isn't at the heart level, is it? It's skin deep. And that's the kind of transformation the law brings.

It's just an external modification to behavior out of fear. But it doesn't change you as a person. It has no power to change your heart. And that's what Christ wants to do.

[18 : 11] He wants to transform your heart. And so when you think of the Gospels, Jesus is constantly coming into contact with these kind of people who outwardly follow the law to a T.

So you think of the Pharisees and they even tithe their cumin, their herbs that they put on their food. That's how, you know, that's how extreme they are with the law.

But inside, they're not good people. And Jesus calls them whitewashed tombs. So on the outside, they're completely white. But on the inside, it's like rotting bodies on the inside.

It's death and decay. And that's what the law does. It might change our external behavior. But it won't change our motivation. We won't have the right motivation.

It was the law that's causing these changes in us. And it has no power in the end to change us. And so Paul himself, he describes his own life in the book of Philippians before he found Christ, before he was a Christian.

[19 : 13] And he was a religious Pharisee. And he said this about himself. As for zeal. Sorry, he said, I'll read this in a moment. Basically, he said that he was perfect according to external law.

But we know that actually he hated Christians and he was wanting to throw them in prison. And he was living a completely horrible life against Christians and against Jesus.

So he says this in Philippians 3 verse 6. As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for righteousness based on the law, faultless. So he says, you couldn't fault me as far as the law was concerned.

But I was persecuting the church. I was a nasty person. So that's what the law did to Paul. And that's what the law did to the Pharisees. It created hypocrites.

So if you're following the law, merely to tick the box that, you know, I've done good. I've earned my standing before God. You've missed the point completely. As a modern day analogy, think of a car driver.

[20 : 23] Someone who drives a car. Most people don't know why I'm calling me a car driver. But who never breaks the speed limit. You know, so he keeps the law completely.

And he'll never go above the speed limit, whatever that is. And so if he's on a 60 mile an hour road, he'll go 60 miles an hour. And if he's on a 30 miles an hour road, he'll go exactly 30 miles an hour.

But, you know, he's on an old country road, a windy country road, under horrid conditions, rain, snow, sleet. And he still goes 60 miles an hour. Now he's obeying the law, isn't he?

And he might pat himself on the back and he won't get a speeding ticket. But actually, he's missed the whole point of the law, hasn't he? Because the point of the law isn't for him to obey the rule, but it's to keep him safe.

And it's to keep those safe around him. If he's driving 60 miles an hour in the snow on a windy country road, he's not safe to be around, is he? He's a dangerous driver. And so in the same way, if that's how we view the law, merely as a box to tick, then we've missed the point.

[21 : 33] What's the heart behind the law? And Jesus, he's always getting behind the law to the deeper sense of what the law was there for.

And he brings it from this external level to the heart. And so on the Sermon on the Mount, he says, You've heard it say, don't murder.

But I say if you're angry in your heart, you've committed murder in your heart. Or he says, you've heard it said, don't commit adultery. But he says, if you look at a woman in lust, then you've committed adultery already in your heart.

And so he's getting at your motivation. Who are you on the inside? And this is where Paul goes. So in verse 13, he says this, You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.

But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh. You know, that's the fear that some people have. But he says, rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command.

[22 : 38] Love your neighbor as yourself. So what's the heart behind the law? It's love. If we love God and love our neighbor, that's the point of the law. We're to be those who love God and love our neighbor.

And if we do that, we fulfill the meaning of the law. Why the law was there in the first place. So how can we love like this? Well, we've already established it's not going to be through imposing law on ourselves or on each other.

Without the Holy Spirit, the best we can hope for is, as we've said, external modification of our behavior. But it has no power to change our hearts.

God must change us by his spirit. And that's the best that other religions can do. They primarily say, you know, follow this list of rules and you'll achieve enlightenment or you'll achieve a right standing before God.

You'll achieve that thing that you're aiming for. But the gospel says this. No matter what you do, you can never work your way up to God. But you must be transformed.

[23 : 46] You must be forgiven. You must be saved by grace as a gift. And so Christ on the cross, he took all of our wrongdoing on himself. And he loves us unconditionally.

All we have to do is trust him. We accept that gift he's given us. And we live by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. And therefore, we don't serve God.

We don't do good. To achieve a right standing before God. We do it out of love for him because he first loved us. Because he died for us. Therefore, I want to follow him.

I want to serve him. If he did that for me, how can I not serve him? How can I not love him? How can I not hate that sin? Which he bore on the cross for me.

And so it's by the spirit. It's not by law that we put to death. The flesh inside of us. These wrong deeds. This wrong way of thinking. But it's by the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 47] And Paul's going to unpack that in the rest of this chapter. But that's not my job. That will be, I think, for Barry next week. So we look forward to that. So we're going to sing now a final hymn.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. But this is a modern version. And the chorus says, my chains are gone. I've been set free. And how are we set free? As we've been saying, we're not set free by our own doing.

But we're set free only by grace. Only by the gift that God has given us. We're set free by grace. So let's remember that as we sing. Let's praise God now.