

## **Galatians: *No Other Gospel***

**Galatians 4:21-5:12**

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I'm thoroughly enjoying this series. Studying Galatians and preparing sermons has been fun for me, and I've sensed God moving in people's hearts as Evan, Jen and I have preached these past three weeks. Experiencing God speaking through the Bible in these messages reinforces what New Testament writers say about the power of God's Word. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." And Hebrews 4: 12 says, "For the word of God is alive and active." God's word revealed to us in the Scriptures is powerful and lifechanging. As we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit interacts with us and reveals truth to us.

I'm looking forward to what God has again for us this morning as we explore his word, but before I dive into chapters 4 and 5, I want to say how much I appreciated Evan and Jen's sermons these past two weeks. I thought they both did a phenomenal job in leading us through a book that, outside of Romans, is probably the Apostle Paul's most complex writing in the New Testament. I'm blessed to be part of a staff that has such a strong team of preachers.

Our focus today is the end of chapter 4 of Galatians and the first 12 verses of chapter 5. In this passage, Paul focuses on a theme that is near and dear to our hearts as Americans: freedom. The word "free" or "freedom" is used seven times, and it's contrasted with the words "slaves" and "slavery," which occur eight times. Verse 1 of chapter 5 is the heart of this passage: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." And that verse continues, "Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened by a yoke of slavery."

So, what is Paul referring to in his use of the words "freedom" and "slavery"? If you're joining us today for the first time in this series, I hope you'll be able to quickly tune into the flow of Galatians, but I encourage all of you to consider going back and listening to the first three sermons Evan, and Jen and I preached. These messages provide context for Paul's writing in Galatians and for our sermon series, which we've titled "No Other Gospel."

Paul is extremely passionate about the sufficiency of the gospel, which can be summed up as follows: Jesus came into the world as God’s Son, and He died for our sins and was raised to life so that all people can be saved by placing their faith in Him. The heart of the gospel for Paul is that all people—regardless of nationality or religion, irrespective of their gender, and whatever their life circumstance might be—can experience salvation and freedom from sin and death through Jesus.

The problem in Galatia—and Galatia wasn’t unique in this—was that new believers who were Gentiles, not Jews by birth, were being told by Jewish Christians that it wasn’t enough just to place their faith in Jesus and accept his salvation. They also had to follow the Old Testament Law, and a central part of the law was circumcision of all males. The mark of circumcision on the life-giving organ of males set apart the Jews as God’s people, and some Jewish Christians were confusing new Gentile converts to Christianity by telling them they needed to be circumcised as part of fulfilling the Jewish law. With everything in him, Paul, who had been a devout Jew until his conversion to Christianity shouted, “NO! NO! NO! Placing your faith in Jesus is enough. Adding requirements to faith in Jesus actually negates the work Jesus did for us on the cross.” And to make his point and show how serious he is about this, Paul writes what I find to be one of the most memorable lines in the New Testament. In fact, I’ve been telling our staff I was curious to see which of us actually got to preach on this statement of Paul. Well, I’m the lucky one.

In verse 12 of Galatians chapter 5, the last verse of today’s passage, the Apostle Paul writes a verse I first came across in Bible quizzing. I was a middle school student at the time, so cut me some slack, but I’ve never forgotten it. Are you ready? Speaking of those who were confusing new Christians by telling them they needed to follow the Jewish and law, including having their males be circumcised, Paul wrote, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (Galatians 5:12). Whoa! Paul, that’s a bit harsh, don’t ya think? It is extreme, but it shows how passionate Paul was about the sufficiency of Jesus’ work on the cross and the danger of adding anything to the pure, simple, powerful gospel. Paul was adamant that embracing the gospel leads to freedom, but adding to it results in slavery.

I need to make a qualifying statement here. Whenever someone makes the claim that faith, not our works, is what allows us to be identified as followers of Jesus, an objection is inevitably raised. The Apostle Paul faced this objection repeatedly, and it happens today when someone seeks to correct our human tendency to rely on good works rather than prioritizing faith. The objection goes something like this: Faith alone is too soft, too subjective and too easy. Surely, what we do and how we live our lives matters.

Here's the key—the Book of James addresses this very well: when we do good works to try and earn our salvation or to receive God's approval, we're ultimately saying salvation is dependent on us and what we do, not on what God has done through Jesus. When we embrace our identity as God's child and accept his grace and salvation by faith, good works and a lifestyle that is pleasing to God will naturally flow out of us.

When we prioritize the work we do, we expend our energy striving to achieve salvation. When we prioritize the faith that we place in God's grace, our good works are the result or the by-product of us already being loved and accepted by God and empowered by his Spirit. Think about it in this way: parents, do you want your child to do what's right because they believe they need to gain your love and approval, or do you want them to do right because they're secure in your love and want to strengthen their relationship with you by doing what pleases you? Those sound similar, but there's a world of difference between them.

Let's look more closely at Paul's argument by reading Galatians 4:21-31.

<sup>21</sup> Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. <sup>23</sup> His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

<sup>24</sup> These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. <sup>26</sup> But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. <sup>27</sup> For it is written:

“Be glad, barren woman,  
you who never bore a child;  
shout for joy and cry aloud,  
you who were never in labor;  
because more are the children of the desolate woman  
than of her who has a husband.”

<sup>28</sup> Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup> At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. <sup>30</sup> But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” <sup>31</sup> Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. – Galatians 4:21-31

In support of his argument for freedom and against slavery, Paul reaches back into Jewish history to Abraham, the man God first called to follow Him, who essentially was the original Israelite. Paul unfolds the argument that Abraham was accepted by God and walked in relationship with Him based on his faith, not because he followed the law. In fact, the law didn’t exist while Abraham lived; it wasn’t given to the Israelites by God until 500+ years later when Moses met with God and received the law on Mount Sinai.

I don’t recall where I encountered this, so I can’t give the author credit, but several years ago, I read that for Jews in Paul’s time, Moses was viewed as the nation of Israel’s “George Washington” because Moses was the lawgiver to whom God had delivered the Ten Commandments and the law. Since the time of Moses, the law had been revered by the Jewish people as what set them apart from all the other nations and clearly marked them as God’s people.

In contrast, Paul highlights the priority of faith in God. Paul flipped the script from Moses the lawgiver to whom God gave the 10 Commandments to Abraham, the man of faith who believed God and was accepted by God based on his belief. Paul in essence says, “It’s faith in God, not following the law, that sets people apart as God’s children.” I encourage you to

follow along as I read Galatians 5:1–12—and then I want to share what this critical point Paul is making means for each of us today.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

<sup>2</sup> Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. <sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup> For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. <sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

<sup>7</sup> You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup> That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup> “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” <sup>10</sup> I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. <sup>11</sup> Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. <sup>12</sup> As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! – Galatians 5:1-12

In these verses, Paul reinforces the understanding I mentioned during the first message in this series: Jesus + anything = nothing; Jesus + nothing = everything

What was occurring at Galatia was happening all across the New Testament world. There was widespread confusion over whether Gentile Christians needed to follow the law to please Jesus and receive his salvation. God addressed this issue in a number of ways:

- First, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell on Jews and Gentiles who placed their faith in Jesus, demonstrating that these religious/cultural differences didn't matter to God.

- Later, Jesus miraculously appeared to Paul—the Jewish law follower *par excellence*—and convinced him that by persecuting Jews who had placed their faith in Christ, he was actually opposing God, and Jesus called Paul as a missionary to Gentiles.
- Then God gave Peter a vision in Acts 10, in which Peter was instructed to eat animals that had been strictly viewed as unclean or non-kosher under Jewish law. Just as the vision ended, a Gentile messenger invited Peter to come and share Jesus with a group of Gentiles. Peter went with them and preached, and an entire roomful of Gentiles believed, placed their faith in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit.
- And finally, the Jewish council consisting of the apostles and elders (leaders in the early church) met in Acts 15 to consider the “circumcision question”—whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law to be saved. Their final decision, led by the Holy Spirit, was this: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements...” And they told them they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols and from sexual immorality.

Against that backdrop, Paul could confidently say, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

While not unheard of, it’s rare for followers of Jesus today to be told we have to follow the Jewish law to be a Christian, but many of us still struggle with a related challenge: Are we saved and declared righteous by Jesus based on what we do or by our faith? At its root, that question was behind the circumcision issue and following the law, and it’s a tension we all wrestle with today.

Last Sunday, Pastor Jen did a great job emphasizing the importance of our identity as a son or daughter of God. That’s our identity and the answer to the ubiquitous “Who am I?” question all of us struggle with at some level. Focusing on our identity in Christ is another way of addressing the question we’re exploring today. In other words, am I defined by what I do or by who I am?

Early on in my time as a youth pastor at McBIC, I was learning a lot, and I was especially perplexed by new ideas I was learning about spiritual warfare, a topic the New Testament

touches on frequently but which is foreign to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century way of thinking. At one point, I expressed my frustration to my senior pastor Ken Hepner. I said, “Ken, if spiritual warfare is so important, why doesn’t the Bible just lay it out in black and white or in a list of seven principles?” My question was specific to spiritual warfare, but it could be asked of almost anything we have questions about related to our faith in Jesus. Ken’s answer was brilliant, and I’ve never forgotten it. Paraphrasing he said, “The Bible doesn’t give us lists of principles and dos and don’ts, because the heart of our faith isn’t a formula or a list of rules. The heart of our faith is relationship with Jesus. If Christianity were about formulas and rules, we wouldn’t need to be in relationship with Jesus, and relationship is what Jesus desires from each of us and what we most need.”

If you don’t remember anything else I’ve said today, remember that Jesus longs for relationship with his people. He’s looking for children who love Him—not rule-followers, and what we need to thrive as people God isn’t rules—it’s a vibrant relationship with Jesus.

Listen to the words Paul uses in our passage today associated with keeping the law: slavery, circumcision, burden, and obligation. Those words feel heavy. They’re not relational words. In contrast, here are the words Paul associates with faith: freedom, spirit, grace, righteousness, truth. Those words speak of the joy we find in relationship with God. As Paul says, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

I don’t want to get into this too much today, because Evan will be preaching about this next week and I’ll be addressing in the last week of this series, but the key factor for followers of Jesus in leaning into faith rather than be burdened with trying to keep all the requirements of the law is THE HOLY SPIRIT. It makes sense, doesn’t it? If God’s primary desire is relationship with us, He would guide us with a person rather than with a set of rules or the law. God sent Jesus as the fulfillment of the law—of everything the Old Testament was pointing to. And when Jesus died and was raised to life and then returned to heaven with his Father, He gave us his Holy Spirit as our counselor, our advocate, and the One who would guide us into all truth.

Jesus’ clearest teaching on the Holy Spirit is found in John’s Gospel chapters 14–16. I’d like to conclude our time together this morning by reading excerpts from those chapters over

you this morning. I invite you to get into a posture of prayer and receive these words of truth from Jesus, the lover of your soul.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. – John 14:16–20

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. – John 14:25–27

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. – John 15:1, 4–5

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. – John 16:7, 12–15



It is by faith in Jesus that we are saved by his grace. Following rules won't save us. It's our relationship with God through his Holy Spirit that brings life. Striving to earn God's approval leads to slavery and ultimately to death. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."