

## Galatians 5:1-6 -Littlebourne 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024 – PH

*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 required 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.*

As you know there were no chapter headings in Paul's letters, so this follows on from last week when Paul explained how Christians as well as Jews were children of promise. We are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ, heirs of Abraham's promise, and no longer bound in slavery to the requirements of the law of Moses. Paul is having to re-emphasise to the Galatian Christians, of which some were Jews and some Greek gentiles, that following the law of Moses was a form of slavery to rules and regulations that served no purpose now that Jesus was the last sacrifice made for all mankind for the forgiveness of sins. We are saved by grace, the freely given gift of mercy and forgiveness, and no longer need perform rituals, like animal sacrifices, visits to the Temple on feast days, and eat only clean foods. Going back to the Jewish way of life was unnecessary for all Christians, whether they were Jews, former converts to Judaism, or Gentiles who never tried following Jewish customs. Christians are free from all this. *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.*

Paul tells the Galatians to resist the attempts by Jewish Christians to enforce Jewish customs on them. Today, Messianic Jews in Israel and elsewhere, are retaining the Jewish customs of their forefathers out of choice, but they aren't expecting Arab Christians, or non-Jewish Christians to do so, in order to be "proper Christians". We all have traditions in churches, and some fellowships have more ritualistic activities than others. However, none of us should be so bold as to claim that without the rituals and traditions of our church, others who do not observe these rituals and traditions are not "proper Christians". Here we have few rituals or traditions beyond what the New Testament requires us to observe as we like to keep things simple and informal. Others will find formality and traditional ceremonies that they have been used to, a help to bring them close to Christ.

These days people talk a lot about "freedom" by which they mean freedom to do what they like. Paul is talking about freedom from the tyranny of having to earn God's favour by observance of the Law in every minute detail – every one of its 613 commands. He means freedom from sin and guilt and condemnation, freedom from the penalty and the power and eventually freedom from the presence of sin.

<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.* The most extreme sign of Judaism is circumcision... which thankfully is invisible to everyone. For converts to Judaism it was the first step on the path to following the law... done to boys aged 8 days for Jews and to adult converts later as a sign of

commitment to Judaism. Paul says it is pointless, useless and moreover is a sign that a man has chosen to follow the law of Moses instead of accepting the grace of Christ. Ceremonial laws to justify a man's righteousness before God were abolished by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Justification by works negates justification by faith; justification by works denies the grace of Christ received by faith in Him. Paul has to emphasise throughout this letter that faith in God was counted as righteousness and not observance of the Law.

If a man is justified by works, he is not justified by faith; if a man is justified by faith, his works add nothing. Circumcision is the outward sign that has nothing to do with inward faith in Jesus. The outward rituals and ceremonies of Judaism do nothing to change the love and mercy of Christ given to those with faith in Jesus. That love and mercy is available to all who believe that Jesus is alive today, willing and able to forgive all who repent and proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

*<sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law.*

Here Paul makes it clear that circumcision requires the commitment to obey the whole law of Moses, which is impossible to do perfectly. Breaking just a tiny bit means a man has sinned and is no longer justified as righteous before God.

*James 5:8-13 <sup>8</sup> If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right. <sup>9</sup> But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. <sup>11</sup> For he who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. <sup>12</sup> Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, <sup>13</sup> because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Ezekiel 18:21-32 is a passage some have had some difficulty in understanding.

*<sup>21</sup> 'But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; he will not die. <sup>22</sup> None of the offences he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. <sup>23</sup> Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? <sup>24</sup> 'But if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will he live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die. <sup>25</sup> 'Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is not just." Hear, you Israelites: is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? <sup>26</sup> If a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. <sup>27</sup> But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. <sup>28</sup> Because he considers all the offences he has committed and turns away from them, that person will surely live; he will not die. <sup>29</sup> Yet the Israelites say, "The way of the Lord is not just." Are my*

*ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? <sup>30</sup> 'Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offences; then sin will not be your downfall. <sup>31</sup> **Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!***

Even in the Old Testament it was not observance of the law but faith in God and repentance that counted as righteousness. It is the inward faith that justifies a man, not the outward observance of all the rules laid down in the law of Moses.

*<sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

Trying to please God by following the law means that all that Christ has done counts for nothing... he may as well have never existed if following the law were the road to salvation. The NIV says "alienated" but the Greek says "cut off" or "severed" from Christ. Quite a strong claim. In addition, "falling away from grace" is something that has troubled many over the centuries. Can we lose our salvation? John 10:27-28 is pretty clear <sup>27</sup> *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; **no one will snatch them out of my hand.** <sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.'* No one can snatch those who have accepted Jesus as saviour from his hand. Yet some will doubt their salvation because they have strayed and wandered off ignoring the faith of their youth or whenever they accepted Jesus is Lord, and have forgotten about Jesus in their daily lives. The answer for them is that if they are thinking about this, then they remain sheep who will not perish. For those who had faith but now never think about Jesus or God or become atheists, who can say what happens to them? Were they sheep in the first place or goats? Life is a journey and a journey with Jesus gives us assurance of the hope he gives us that we will never be snatched from his hand.

Grace and legalism cannot co-exist. Christ fulfilled the law and its righteousness, so that by grace we are justified through him. By following the law, a man is subject to the law and its punishments... he no longer has Jesus to intercede for him and take on the punishments he deserves for sinning and breaking the law. The Galatians may have believed that keeping the law made them more perfect, but only Christ's grace and righteousness can make us perfect when we stand before the throne of God on judgment day. Many may think falling from grace is the result of immoral conduct, persistent sinning, but none of us is saved by our moral conduct and good works. We are saved by our faith in the grace of Jesus Christ. We all sin, and we can all repent and ask for forgiveness believing that Jesus is willing and able to forgive us our trespasses. The Galatians relying on the law had lost sight of the reason Jesus died and rose again, and were in danger of falling away into legalism and becoming like the Jews who didn't accept Jesus as Messiah.

*<sup>5</sup> For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.*

Paul now speaks of the Holy Spirit who convicts the sinner of sin, but who encourages the redeemed to stand firm and grow closer to Christ. In one sense the death of Jesus has made all believers right with God, and in another sense all believers hope that the righteousness that clothes them by faith in Jesus is sufficient when they meet God.

*<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.*

Paul repeats that circumcision is an outward sign that has no value and is irrelevant in the eyes of Jesus. For those “in Christ”, those committed to Christ, faith has value. But faith without love is not enough just as love without faith is not enough. The fulfilment of the Law was made through the love of Jesus.

Up until now in Galatians love has only been mentioned once before. It’s not the love that Christians express in loving their neighbours or God himself, but the love of Christ who sacrificed himself for each one of us. In chapter 2:19-21 Paul already mentioned what we’ve looked at this afternoon! He repeats himself a lot in Galatians. Obviously, they needed the message hammered home repeatedly that circumcision is unnecessary and faith in Jesus is needed in order to be justified before God.

*<sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*

It’s only at the end of the letter to the Galatians that anything much is said about love. Love is central to the Gospel message. We’ll be looking at that next week.