

GALATIANS

Lesson 15

Liberty and Not Legalism Galatians 5:1-6

INTRODUCTION

Anybody who knows anything about the American Revolution knows the famous words of Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty or give me death!" Patrick Henry would have rather died than give up his civil liberties. He took a stand for liberty, believing with all his heart that death would be better than living under the bondage of British rule. Yet there is a liberty far more important than political liberty and that is the liberty of the soul. Liberty of the heart, mind, conscience, spirit and will from the bondage of law, works, sin, death and hell, and this is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in this section of scripture.

Chapters five and six of Galatians deals with grace and sanctification (Christian living). It is not enough to know the doctrine of grace but it must be experienced in one's life.

The legalistic teaching of the Judaizers had so penetrated the thinking of the Galatians that it was affecting the way they lived. Right doctrine brings right living and wrong doctrine brings wrong living. These Galatians, instead of trusting in the indwelling Holy Spirit to produce righteousness in them were trying to produce righteousness by depending upon self-effort through keeping of the Mosaic Law. The power for living the Christian life is not found in the Mosaic Law but in the Holy Spirit, and the Galatians were exhorted to put themselves under the Spirit's control.

AN EXHORTATION TO LIBERTY - 5:1

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then. . ."

The Apostle Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in the Christian liberty which is caused by the grace of God. In context, this is not civil or political freedom but spiritual freedom from the Mosaic Law and good works as a means of gaining acceptance with God. Christ In His death has set the Christian free from the law to live a free life by the grace of God apart from the bondage of the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law was temporary until Christ would come and then He would bring a better and higher way of life. The Mosaic Law was temporary until Christ would come and then He would bring a better and higher way of life. This new way would be the law of Christ which is put into operation by means of the Holy Spirit. Christ has set the Christian free to execute the Christian way of life.

Once we have been saved by grace we must continue to grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18 **"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."**). We must stand, hold firm and never retreat from our liberty in Christ. Our motto should be, "Give me liberty in Christ or I die!"

"And do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

By going back under the law, the Galatians would be ensnared by the law and made a slave to it. They would be no better off than when they were slaves to sin and works in their pagan religions before conversion to Christ. They left one form of bondage only to get entangled in another form. The Mosaic Law squelches individual freedom. It sets forth rules and regulations in such a way that it confines men in the area of freedom of choice and self-determination. The law puts a man in a straight-jacket, cramping his experience, hindering his actions and keeping him from experiencing the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit. These Galatians had been saved by grace and experienced the Christian life in the Spirit, but now they were going back under the law for salvation and sanctification.

Once a Christian gets into any legalistic system it is very hard to get out. Legalism is adding anything to salvation or spirituality, which scripturally is purely by grace through faith in Christ. Legalism brings pride, frustration and indifference to the Christian life.

I do not believe Paul is saying it is wrong to use the moral law of the Old Testament as a guide for living or even a rule of conduct, as long as it is not used as a ground of acceptance with God, a means of salvation or a basis of spirituality.

A WARNING AGAINST LEGALISM - 5:2-4

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”

These Galatians had received Christ but were thinking about going back under the law to gain the approval of God. They felt they could not have the blessing of God unless they permitted themselves to be circumcised and perhaps some felt they could not be saved at all without circumcision, for this is what the Judaizers taught (Acts 15:1, 5, 10 **“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved. . . Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses. . . Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?”**”). Christ in His death delivered them from the law and to go back under the law would place them in a position where the benefits of Christ's death would not be of any advantage to them. They would not be in a position to receive the real blessings of Christ if they went back under the law.

By going back under the law, Christians are depriving themselves of the ministry of the Holy Spirit which Christ made possible through His death and resurrection and which ministry was not provided for under the law.

“Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.”

If a Christian goes back under the law, then he must accept the responsibility of the whole law. All the Mosaic Law must be kept in every detail. If the Christian submits to circumcision, then he must also keep the Sabbath on Saturday with all its prohibitions as set forth in the law. All the social, moral, ceremonial and religious aspects of the law must be kept also. All the Mosaic Law is binding or none of it is. By what rule can we isolate certain parts of the law and say they are binding for salvation on us and others are not? Furthermore, those who desire to put themselves under the law must not only do the whole law but they must do it perfectly if they are to be saved.

The law is like a window pane—if one section of the pane is broken the whole window is broken. So to break one point of the law is to break all, and to keep one point of the law one must keep all the law.

For the Christian to go back under law is to place himself in bondage. This does not mean, however, that many of the moral principles of the Mosaic Law are to be ignored. There is much truth for the Christian in the moral law by application, but the law is not binding in the totality of its 613 commands on the Christian as a way of life. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; to go back under the law for justification and sanctification is to say that Christ's work on the cross is unnecessary and of no value and that the work of the Spirit is useless. An attitude of self-effort by law-works alienates the believer from Christ. You have fallen from grace.

By going back under law, these Christians had fallen from grace. They had not lost their salvation but they had gone away from the teachings of grace for salvation and sanctification. The word "fallen" means "to lose one's hold on" which indicates that these saved people had lost their hold upon grace for daily living by the power of the Holy Spirit. If a person seeks to be justified or sanctified by law, he has

abandoned the grace principle and is operating outside of the sphere of grace. These Galatians had fallen from the grace method, Just because the Galatians lost hold of Christ in sanctifying grace does not mean that Christ lost hold of them for salvation.

A Christian can fall from grace by going into any form of legalism, but he cannot fall from salvation, for Christ died for any and all sins of the Christian. If one could lose his salvation, this would make a mockery of Christ and His perfect death for sinners.

A person could be saved and then through false teaching think that circumcision, law keeping, baptism, church membership, walking an aisle or any physical act was necessary for salvation or sanctification. The person would fall from grace but not salvation. This person falls from the grace method or grace principle because he does not understand God's sovereign grace in salvation or the grace manifested by Christ in His completed and perfect death for sinners.

A more common form of legalism in some Christian circles is to think that some man-made taboos are necessary for spirituality, such as style of hair, length of skirts, types of dress, involvement in certain amusements, being seen in certain places and so on. This, too, is a form of legalism and is falling from grace. Legalists, whether saved or unsaved, are miserable people because they are filled with pride and have a critical attitude about any and everything they do not like. They want everyone to conform to their picky set of man-made rules and regulations even though the Bible has nothing at all to say about these things. This is why it is so important for the Christian to understand his salvation was begun in grace and must continue in grace (Acts 13:43 **“When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.”**).

A NEW WAY OF LIFE

“But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.”

In this verse, Paul gives the first mention a new kind of life the Christian is to live, not by law but by faith and through the Holy Spirit. This is the life of liberty in Christ Jesus.

The "righteousness" in this context refers to experiential righteousness in one's life after conversion to Christ. This is the practical righteousness that one hopes for, as he is dependent on the Holy Spirit in his daily life. The true believer is constantly and continually looking for this righteousness to flow from his life. Every Christian should have an intense desire for, and an eager expectation of, practical righteousness which will be produced in the life as he yields to the Holy Spirit in his daily life.

This, of course, is the answer to the accusation that grace teaching produces loose living because it does not demand that a person keep the Mosaic Law. The Christian has a new restrainer other than the law. He has the Holy Spirit in him who is at work to produce righteousness. The law could only provide external righteousness, but the Holy Spirit works in the Christian to produce internal righteousness.

The person who says that Jesus' sacrifice is not adequate, or who flagrantly continues in willful sin thinking, "so what? I am under grace." Is insulting the Spirit of grace. Anyone who thinks this does not understand the grace of God or the salvation that it brings. Such are blind to grace and open to the judgment of God. (Kay Arthur, *Lord, I Need Grace to Make It*)

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

There is no strength or power in circumcision or uncircumcision when one is in Christ. The power is in God who loves and gives the power to exercise faith through the Holy Spirit. This "love" does not refer to man's love or we would have salvation or spirituality by works. It would be making faith the result of man's love. Faith is the result of God's love and this faith works because God is behind it.

The doctrine of grace does not cause a person to be indifferent about his Christianity resulting in low morals and ethics, but real grace and love from God produces faith in the Christian. This could be translated, “But faith which is working by love.”

The Holy Spirit is working inside every Christian to produce holiness of life (Phil. 2:12b-13 **“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”**). The Christian does not work in order to be saved or keep himself saved, but he works by faith because he is saved. True faith works.

The true Christian will prove with his life he is saved, but the power to exercise faith comes from God Himself, for He is working in the life of every Christian through the Holy Spirit. Works are not the cause of our salvation, but are the result of it. The Christian works as he is motivated by the Holy Spirit out of a deep appreciation of God’s grace and love that has been shown him in Christ Jesus. Spirit-moved and faith-prompted works are necessary to prove, demonstrate and give evidence of true saving faith (James 2:14 **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims (says) to have faith but has no deeds (works)? Can such a faith save him? (No!)”**).

V. CONCLUSION

Now maybe we understand why we must stand fast and hold firm to the grace of God and not give one inch to legalism in our Christian lives.

Many years ago there was a very famous Scottish preacher named Brownlow North who was highly esteemed and seemed like a man who had it all together. But no one understood better than North that he was a child of grace.

In his younger days, he was a ladies man—handsome, rich, a good dancer, and an excellent horseman. He proposed to nineteen women and all said, “yes,” only to have their hearts broken by this debonair man.

Brownlow came from a godly home and had a mother who taught him Biblical truths and prayed for him. But vanity caused him to turn from Christ and to seek a debauched life of drinking, gambling and women. He finally married and after the death of his son, he became conscious of God and his sins and decided he would become a clergyman in the Church of England (he was not saved.)

When the Bishop learned of Brownlow’s sinful past, he refused his ordination. North was bitterly disappointed and returned to his sinful lifestyle with a vengeance. He also mocked anything or anyone who was Christian. At forty-four, his body was racked with such violent pain he was sure he was going to die. North gives an account of his own salvation:

Dropping his cigar he gasped to his son, “I am a dead man, take me upstairs.” They helped him to his room and he threw himself on his bed. “My first thought then was, ‘Now, what will my forty-four years of following the devices of my own heart profit me? In a few minutes I shall be in hell.’ At that moment I felt constrained to pray, but it was merely the prayer of a coward, a cry for mercy. I was not sorry for what I had done, but I was afraid of the punishment of my sin.”

The housemaid hurried to light the fire, while her master lay groaning on the bed. Unwittingly, she had a part of play in that night’s work. “Though I did not believe it at that time,” continues North’s account, “that I had ten minutes to live, and knew that there was no possible hope for me but in the mercy of God, and that if I did not seek that mercy I could not expect to have it, yet such was the nature of my heart that it was a balance with me, a thing to turn this way or that, I could not tell how, whether I should wait till that woman left the room or whether I should fall on my knees and cry for mercy in her presence.”

The girl struck a match, and the fire blazed up. At that moment she heard a movement behind her and turned round. To her astonishment her pagan master was on his knees—and praying aloud. “I believe it

was a turning point with me,” said North in after years. “I believe that if I had at that time resisted the Holy Ghost it would have been once too often.”

The next day he told his guests that he had given his heart to Christ. He seemed as if he had just risen from a long illness, and very gentle and subdued in manner. Family prayers were instituted forthwith, and his dissolute friends informed that, “I am, I trust by the grace of God, a changed man.” His aged mother, when he went to see her, said, “Brownlow, God is not only able to save you but to make you more conspicuous for good than ever you were for evil.”

The past now caught up with him. Weary weeks and months of spiritual conflict assailed him. Temptations, doubts as to his salvation, the suspicion of those who might have helped but doubted his sincerity, cravings for the alcohol which he had abjured, all this put him through the fire. He read nothing but the Bible. His wife would hear him groaning aloud and find him rolling on the carpet, agonizing in prayer. He would listen greedily to the exposition of Scripture.

Brownlow wrestled with the assurance of his salvation. Finally, after six months, he began an intense study of the book of Romans. Now, for the first time, he understood the grace of God and was assured of his salvation.

Sometime later, Brownlow North was asked to fill pulpits in Scotland and he became one of the most popular preachers in that land. People who never went to church flocked to hear him preach and many were saved.

Brownlow tells of an experience in his life that caused him to stand fast, to hold firmly to the grace of God in salvation:

One night, as North was about to enter the pulpit in a highland town, a man handed him a letter, asking him to read it before he preached. The letter reminded him in no uncertain terms of some of the more repulsive excesses of his past life and it ended, “How dare you pray and speak to the people this evening when you are such a vile sinner!”

North mounted the pulpit and the service began. At sermon time he announced his text, looked down at the sea of expectant faces—and read out the letter. The hush was intense. He spoke again, “All that is here said is true. It is a correct picture of the degraded sinner I once was. And oh—how wonderful must the grace be that could raise me up from such a death in trespasses and sins and make me what I appear before you tonight, a vessel of mercy, one who knows that all his past sins have been cleansed away through the atoning blood of the Lamb of God. It is of His redeeming love that I now have to tell you.”

“I’ll tell you what I am,” he would say, “I am a man who has been at the brink of the bottomless pit and has looked in, and as I see many of you going down to that pit I am here to ‘hello’ you back, and warn you of your danger. I am here as the chief of sinners, saved by grace, to tell you that the grace which has saved me can surely save you.”

When the Devil says to you, “You have been too sinful in your past to speak out for Christ,” you scream out, “I’m righteous in Christ! I’m a child of grace and you Satan have no hold on me! I belong to Christ and will speak for Him!”

When your flesh says, “I have done so many evil acts God would never really forgive me,” you say to your conscience, “I am perfectly righteous in Christ by God’s sovereign grace! I am forgiven and I will forever proclaim the glories of my God who saved me by His grace!”

Grace saved us. Grace is saving us right now and grace will save us by taking us home to the God of grace.