

STANDING OUR GROUND

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

The final words of the Declaration of Independence are these:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States...And for the support of this declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

Last week we celebrated the 208th birthday of the United States, the anniversary of the signing of this document. You may have taken the occasion to remember something of our history; perhaps you even thought of the Declaration itself. Our history is a witness to us that freedom and independence are always attended by struggle. It may cost life, fortune and sacred honor. Bondage is easy, but freedom demands vigilance and courage. Their desire to be free, demanded of the signers of the Declaration of Independence that they go to war. I hope none of us are so foolish as to believe that freedom of any kind is ever the natural state of man. We tend toward bondage. We have to fight for freedom.

That is true in every sense. I talked recently with a friend who is recovering from cancer therapy. He shared about his physical struggle to be free again, and to be free from the terrible depression that has attended his therapy, to be free to use his body again. You may know people who are struggling to free themselves from various addictions and from bad habits. All of us struggle to free ourselves from the rat race of our society and its incessant demands to control us. We want to be free to make our own choices in obedience to the Lord God.

The most basic freedom of all is spiritual freedom, our freedom as sons and daughters of God. That too demands a struggle, a willingness on our part to take a stand and fight. In our study in the book of Galatians we have come to a place where the apostle Paul uses some of the strongest, most vehement language in the Bible to insist that those who read his words make the choice to stand for freedom and reject slavery. Here is the clarion call of Galatians 5:1:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

What follows is Paul's insistence that we not sell out, that we not take even the earliest steps towards compromise with slavery.

The middle section of this book, which we have looked at in recent weeks, is a series of diverse arguments by the apostle insisting, whether by means of our own experience, the teaching of Scripture, common sense or whatever, that a religion of slavery and a religion of freedom need to be very carefully distinguished from each other. A great chasm stands fixed

between them. While human beings by nature try to trust God and at the same time trust themselves, that won't work. It can't be done.

That analysis behind us, now comes the call from the apostle to do something about it to make a choice. Given that all the things he said are true, what is the proper choice to make? Galatians 5:2:

I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Here Paul is addressing the Galatians, the hearers of this false message that had been taught. (Later on he will address the teachers of the false message.) In both cases the language is biting and chilling. A powerful witness is being made. "Christ will be of no benefit to you," he says. "You will cut yourselves off from him if you fail to make the right choice." "Severed from Christ...fallen from grace."

The issue of circumcision came up earlier in this book. Certain teachers had come to Galatia from Jerusalem offering a kind of Super-Christianity, a Christianity that said that not only could Christians love the Lord Jesus and benefit from his sacrifice, but they could have a religious beauty of their own. The ancient religion of the Jews, with all of its impressive documents and its great culture, was available to them so that ordinary Christians could graduate to a kind of super-Christianity. Circumcision was the focus of the effort to win Gentile Christians to a Jewish style of life.

There is a powerful attraction in that. We do not all feel the attraction toward Jewish appearance as much in our day because our cultures are so different, but this was a penetrating offer being made in Galatia. People were being told they could look good, they could gain greater respect and admiration because of the higher essence of their faith. Paul is saying that that entire argument is focused on one choice: whether people will be circumcised or not, whether they will step into Judaism in that way. "I have thrown down the gauntlet," Paul says. "If you give in at this point you will make a very serious error, because once you give in there you are bound to the whole thing; you must then keep the whole law. You lose the advantages of Christianity because you have denied your Lord by taking the step of circumcision. That is a very false religion; a dangerous choice you are making."

Further, at this point he is speaking to people who imagined themselves clever enough to do both. There were some who were undoubtedly swept away by the argument of the Judaizers, some who bought it lock, stock and barrel and were already well down the road back to slavery, but there must have been others who were smart enough and mature enough to say, in effect, "I really am squarely a gospel man, but it would be nice to have these other advantages as well. There is a lot of enthusiasm here in Galatia. I can go ahead and make the choice to apparently be on their side while I retain freedom to see myself as adhering to Paul's sort of faith." Yet the warning is strong and clear. "Don't play with it. Don't try to be cute. Don't try to be fleshly and spiritual at the same time because it will get out of your control. Once the compromise begins to take over, if you make the choice to give in, you have set on a course back to slavery."

Circumcision is not an issue that has spiritual significance for us. It is not a focal point of theological debate today. But there are plenty of places where the issue of legalism is being raised for us, situations where we are tempted to compromise with a religion that is external, one that gains the approval of men only. This is a religion that, in Christ's name, wants to make us impressive to people, not to God. So we are faced with the very same temptation. External measures count more in this

religion--money, size, numbers, social standing, titles, degrees, popularity. We love these in place of Christ, and we do so apparently in his name.

How many of us have not at some time awakened to find that our prayer life is no longer concerned about intimacy with God, but with what people listening to us think of our prayers? Fellowship groups which began for ministry in Christ's name become social clubs where newcomers are made to feel awkward and gossip dominates conversation. Evangelism becomes a routine--a program to generate numbers rather than the response of hearts that are burdened for the lost. A religion of externals plants its stake in our midst as easily as it did in Galatia. We find ourselves longing to look good on the outside more than we long for righteousness. Circumcision was a physical mark that offered the same kind of benefits that the social and psychological masks common among us claim to provide. And, the apostle announces, once you begin to compromise you have chosen a very dangerous path.

All that is required to change lanes on our California freeways is a slight flick of the wrist. But that decision to change lanes can have the greatest consequence when the freeway divides a little later on and you find yourself headed for Glory rather than San Francisco. It may not have seemed such a big thing at the time, but that little flick of your wrist could send you 180 degrees away from the direction you wanted to go. You find you are not able to stop and turn around; an apparently small failure at a critical point leads to total change of course. That is what Paul is saying. "Don't give in. Don't compromise. Every man who receives circumcision is bound to keep the whole law."

Beginning in Galatians 5:7-12, Paul speaks of the teachers of this false religion.

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who called you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. Would that those who are troubling you even mutilate themselves.

Galatians 5:12 is one of the earthiest and angriest verses in the New Testament. Martin Luther has rendered it in these words:

Tell those who are disturbing you I would like to see the knife slip.

The New English Bible translates it in this way:

As for these agitators, they had better go the whole way and make eunuchs of themselves.

Paul is saying if they want to cut (in circumcision), let them cut to mutilate themselves. That is a hard statement, one that cannot be read casually. What makes it even more difficult is to realize that the vehemence with which Paul wrote is not widely evident today. Most people do not think phony Christianity is that serious. Most of us are far too comfortable with it. We would not say something like this, especially in public. But it ought to arrest us to see how genuinely, righteously angry Paul was about those who would sell phony Christianity to other people.

Throughout these verses you cannot miss the insistence that there is an all-or-nothing proposition about our faith. We cannot mix together legalism and the gospel. In Galatians 5:2 Paul does not say that Christ will be of lesser benefit to you,

he will be of no benefit at all to you. You are cut off from Christ; you have fallen out of grace if you try and combine these together. In Galatians 5:9 he adds, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Leaven does not just stay in one corner of the lump of dough, it leavens the whole thing; once you introduce it, it takes over. In Galatians 5:11 he says, “The stumbling block of the cross [the potency of the cross] has been abolished.” It has not been dimmed; it has been abolished. His argument is that you either find yourself in one camp or another. You have made a choice to stand in one place or the other. It is an all or nothing proposition. We need to receive this as seriously as Paul is writing it.

One of my first experiences with Christian leaders was as part of a campus ministry at Stanford, which allowed for periodic attendance at united campus ministers’ meetings. This group was made up of all persuasions: Christian, Buddhist, Jew, Mormon, etc. When that group met, there was more posturing, insecurity, intellectual affectation, concern about numbers and incessant desire to be approved of than any group I had ever been associated with. Emphasis on externals was virtually the only order of business. How do things look? How impressive am I? What degrees are being earned? How big is the group? How measurable is our impact? Here Paul is saying, “Rather than that, rather than letting leadership in God’s name stand for those things, I would rather see them mutilated.” At those meetings there was no freedom, no joy, no love of the glory of God, rather everybody was concerned about how they looked on the surface. Paul warns us of falling into this terrible danger.

In the middle of this paragraph we have the positive statement against which these negatives are raised. The apostle does not only say, “Avoid this, stay away from this, choose against this,” he also gives an example of what is right to do, a positive example of what life-giving Christianity can be about. Galatians 5:5-6:

For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

Faith is mentioned in both of these verses: 5:5, “Faith through the Spirit waits for the hope of righteousness”; while in 5:6 we read, “Faith works through love.” Men and women of faith, mature men and women are able to wait for the hand of God to act. And such Christians also work because they are committed to love.” Faith waits and faith works,” Paul says. We have experienced the righteousness of God; we are new creatures in Christ. A hunger for the real thing is the result. Knowing the righteousness of God, we are hungry for every impediment to be done away with. We look forward to the day when our bodies will be made new and they will respond as they ought, to our spirits. We long for the day when the areas of our life in which we yet remain blind and faithless will become clear to us. Paul says in Corinthians, “We now see through a glass darkly,” but the day is coming when we will “see face-to-face.” If we have tasted the righteousness of God we ought to want only righteousness. We will not settle for second best. We will not settle for what is apparent rather than what is real. We will not settle for the quick fix.

Circumcision is a remarkable symbol in that regard. It happens so quickly. One moves so quickly from being outside the accepted group to being inside. And the flesh, of course, loves answers that are quick, answers that demand no waiting time. Immediate gratification is the constant desire of the flesh. But Paul is saying that men and women of faith, certain of their hope, trusting in God, can wait and will wait on God to act. The quick fix answers to loneliness, sorrow, or depression are not for them.

A number of years ago a popular contemporary tune had as its central line, “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” It struck me that that is the kind of option the flesh offers all the time; “I can’t wait. If I can’t have what I want right now, I’ll take what’s in front of me.” I have heard Rich Carlson, one of our pastors, share about his tours of duty when he was in the military. At times he was separated from his wife Marty for months, even for more than a year at a time.

During those long separations he and Marty exchanged letters and remained committed to one another, looking forward to honeymooning together again on his return. What a contradiction to the sentiments of that song! “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you love, anyway,” was their theme song. They were not interested in second best.

Paul says, “We, through the Spirit, by faith are waiting for the certain hope that has been planted in us because we know the righteousness of God.” Further, he says, “We are working for, we are caught up in loving the things that God loves, so we are about the enterprise of God.” There are an unlimited number of things you can get involved in if you are caught up with the love of God. There are endless opportunities to pray, to serve, to help, to care for, to lift burdens from the shoulders of people, to give yourself in the great work of eternal value that abounds on every side. But there are very few opportunities to do pleasant and easy work in God’s name, works for which we receive the applause and the credit of men as our standing and our stock rises in their eyes. Many Christians sit around feeling bad, wishing they could do something, but what they really want is to be seen in the limelight. Paul, however, says, “We are working for love’s sake. We have been allowed to see those things which God loves, those people whom God loves, and we are so caught up loving what he loves it does not matter whether anybody gets the credit or even notices. I’m not going to wait for an opportunity to be applauded. I want to be about what matters to him.”

Thus the apostle is pointing out the alternative to phony, fleshly religion is the kind of faith that hungers so for righteousness that it will not settle for second best but rather will wait for the Spirit of God to bring about his desire in his time. Let us wait for him to open our eyes to where we still are blind and foolish, areas where we may be tempted to desire immediate gratification. Furthermore, Paul declares, freedom, not slavery, allows us to be involved in the work of God that is eternally valuable, work that does not pay any attention to who gets the credit. That is the alternative he is advocating. That is what mature Christians are like.

I was a young Christian in a very exciting era. As a Christian in the days of the Jesus Movement, I knew hundreds of people who were 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week Christians. Many wonderful friendships were formed back then, some 12 or 15 years ago. During the last year I have met many of those friends whom I had not, for any number of reasons, seen for a long time. It has been gratifying to see that a large majority of them are still totally committed Christians; they are still committed to what is important and valuable in life. But some, on the other hand, have lost their way. They still are Christians, but they have opted for safety, for boundaries and for routine as the highest good in life. People who once loved to study the Scriptures would now much rather be involved in Christian chat groups. They belong to churches that are predictable and comfortable, churches where everyone belongs to the same social and economic class. Serious discipleship has become secondary to warm feelings and uplifted emotions. Their biggest concerns in life are surface matters, not what concerns Christ. Their fervent faith has dissipated. What has happened to them? This didn’t happen overnight. It happened because little compromises were made along the way. A quick fix here, a certain advantage there, have taken their toll. The small compromises led to bigger and bigger compromises until there was little life left.

I believe that is the issue that Paul is addressing here. He is saying, in effect, “If you give in, especially after you have been warned, then you have made a big mistake. Once you allow yourself to be circumcised you have got to keep the whole law--and the law is a terrible master.” Paul is like Jesus in many senses. Here we find the apostle’s strongest and most vehement language is addressed not to those who openly reject and scorn the truth, but to those who sell a phony imitation.

As we read these verses all of us must ask ourselves whether or not we have become comfortable with compromise, whether we want the approval of people so badly that we are willing to pretend it is Christian to seek that approval rather than to want to serve God and glorify him. Paul warns, “You can’t do both at once. You can’t mix them together. You must choose one or the other.” Clearly the choice being advocated is for us to live by faith so that we will wait for what is

really valuable, and live by faith so that we will work on what love gives us to do. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”

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Galatians 5: 1-12

12th Message

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