

# DEADLY COMPROMISE

*SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS*

By Steve Zeisler

One of the most startling verses in the New Testament is Galatians 5:12. Eugene Peterson has rendered this verse, “Why don’t these agitators, obsessive as they are about circumcision, go all the way and castrate themselves!” (1) He has captured a word play in the Greek. The word for circumcision means to cut in a circle, or to cut around. The word that he translates “castration” means to cut apart. I think he has accurately picked up Paul’s viscerally felt antagonism toward the group that was undermining the faith of his beloved friends in Galatia. Earlier in the book Paul rained curses on this same group of people. He called them spies and deceivers and troublemakers. We might assume that his primary concern in Galatians has been to stand against these villains, to expose them, to challenge them. But that’s actually not his main purpose.

The majority of the book up until this point has been an argument that we can lose our freedom by choosing to live by rules, by the approval of humans, rather than by the gospel that gives us approval in Christ. The summary of Paul’s argument is in 5:1: “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.”

Galatians 5:1-12:

**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.**

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

**You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!**

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.” Of first concern in the apostle’s argument is that there is no such thing as compromise in these matters. Most of us love the role of chameleon. We like to take on the flavor and color of the crowd we find ourselves with, to enjoy the prevailing line of thought. We like to fit in and be accepted. And if we are not careful we will effectively become hypocrites, telling ourselves, “I am committed to the gospel, and Christ means everything to me. That isn’t going to change. So in various settings I can agree to be measured by external performance. Nothing bad will happen.” But what we are really saying is, “I can add the law to the promise. I can add the flesh to the Spirit.” And this text insists that if you do that, you have lost what is most valuable.

There are three observations I’d like to make on the impossibility of compromise.

## **The law is all-or-nothing**

First, the law itself does not allow for compromise. We've already observed that in 3:10. "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" The problem with observing the law is that it is an all-or-nothing proposition. If you don't do everything written in the Book of the Law--not just circumcision, but every detail of every commandment--you've failed at the whole thing! The words of the law themselves call for a complete renunciation of everything except external conformity to these statements. There is no "most improved player" category. There are no points for trying hard or having good intentions. The law doesn't allow for circumcision plus grace.

The second reason compromise is impossible is the nature of the psychology of self-improvement.

## **Praise is addictive**

Whenever you improve yourself you will get strokes in the short run for doing so. Suppose you decide you don't like the way you look, so you go to diet camp and lose fifty pounds. You have everything about your appearance redone: your wardrobe, your hair, the way you carry yourself. An entirely new you comes back from diet camp. And the first thing that happens is that people praise you for your new appearance. "Oh, it's amazing! You look terrific!" If you have cosmetic surgery, hair implants, hair color, even a new car, the same thing happens. The problem is, we love the praise and we want very much for it to continue. It pays off to make ourselves look better--for a while. But the new car becomes the old car very shortly. You have to have the cosmetic surgery redone over and over until there's no more skin left to work on. You have to go back to diet camp all the time because those pounds keep rolling back. I think all of us understand what it's like to be approved of for looking good. It is addictive. But finally there is just no possible way to keep up with it. Then, of course, the negative reinforcement comes. People ridicule you for attempting another one of those self-improvements. The psychology of making yourself look better is reinforced both positively and negatively.

One of the eaves at our house has dry rot, and I've been able to use putty and paint to cover it. The rot is less obvious for a short time. But the only way to really fix it is to carve out the whole thing, which will make everything look much worse for a while before it's really fixed. In the same way, in order to fix what's wrong inside you, you have to be willing to live like a torn-up house for a while. That's the way grace works.

Paul is saying that it's either law or grace. It's either keeping the rules, doing the cosmetic fixes, or trusting the Savior to rebuild you. And if you seriously give in at an important point, you've removed yourself from the gospel. "You have fallen away from grace."

It's instructive to note that grace is imagined as a high place. When you experience grace, it's usually with your head up. You stand on a mountaintop. You come to a place of insight where you can see a great many things. It is a high place emotionally and spiritually. You hear an extraordinary poem, or you're touched by powerful music, or someone opens the Scriptures and they wash over you making marvelous sense. Someone loves you for no reason. These are all "high" experiences in which you begin to see clearly what it is like for God to love you, not because of your performance but because he just loves you. And it takes your breath away.

What happens, though, if we would rather have the approval of the lowlands, if you will, is that we fall from that high place. The clarity of our vision is lost. In *The Screwtape Letters* (2), C.S. Lewis describes heaven as a place where there is always either music or silence. Hell is filled with anguish and fury and noise. I think the idea of falling from grace is in mind there. In the high place we can be quiet in some beautiful setting, or sing without any hesitation. But when we fall from grace we fall into the midst of everybody else's competitive, angry, self-promotion. It becomes noisier and noisier, and we can't hear the beautiful music any more. We can't remember

why we were so touched by the gospel in the first place. And the noisier it gets, the harder it is to remember the beauty of either the silence or the music.

In Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (3), he tells of contemplating Rembrandt's painting of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. He sat for hours, silently, before this great work of art. He just looked and thought and learned and listened. And he found himself broken open by the silence of heaven.

Finally, the third reason that there can be no compromise between grace and law, between the Spirit and the flesh, is seen in the way religious power structures works.

## **Power structures need slaves**

You join a community, a small group or society that has articulated a version of what God wants. They tell you, "Your behavior is to be these fifty-five things (and we're keeping track)." Once you enter that world, you have entered a pyramid scheme, essentially. People in the group achieve standing by gaining prominence over others whose behavior they can restrict, over whom they can lord their authority. The people they can oversee make them rise higher, and the ones above them, standing on their shoulders, in turn can rise up higher still. The world of religious competition is a pyramid, and there is a great deal of effort put into reinforcing the behavior of all of its members.

In the old musical *West Side Story* one of the songs says,

"When you're a Jet you're a Jet all the way  
from your first cigarette to your last dying day."

Once you join such groups, it is hard to get out.

What is the alternative to compromise?

## **Eagerly waiting for righteousness**

Verse 5: "But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Consider the phrase "eagerly awaiting." Waiting seems so passive and eagerness so active. Eagerly doing nothing sounds like an oxymoron. But the Greek word here is *apekdechomai*, which is the ordinary word for "wait" with a preposition attached to the front that adds eagerness or intensity. It is serious, energetic waiting, a passionate looking forward to something in the future.

Did you ever have the experience as a child of finding out where your parents kept all the Christmas presents hidden? If you learned ahead of time what your Christmas presents were going to be, on Christmas day when you opened them up you could only feign a little enthusiasm. But if your parents were too tricky or you somehow restrained yourself from peeking so that you didn't know what your presents were, you were eagerly awaiting Christmas day. That was because you had disciplined yourself to wait for something instead of having it right away.

That's part of Paul's logic. You can retain the status of "uncircumcised" or gain the status of "circumcised" right away. There is instant significance to being in one category or the other, whatever the advantages or disadvantages. Paul says, "We, on the other hand, wait for something, and we wait for it eagerly." The phrase "the righteousness

for which we hope” refers to the completion of the work of Christ in us, being everything we are going to be some day. We will settle for nothing less; we don’t want short-term, merely external status points to get in the way.

The phrase “faith expressing itself through love” is also important.

## **Inner faith**

Expressing faith is the active alternative to trying to fix the outside. It’s done from the inside. It’s the alternative to a religion that wants to look better, that prefers external marks in place of something meaningful inside. At the end of this letter Paul writes, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything....” (6:15). He’s making the same argument there that he does here: What matters is something inside that’s so profound, it transcends all externals.

I have a friend who bought a used car recently. The car has a Navy Seals sticker on the back. He lives in a high crime area, so he said, “No one is going to steal this car!” because of the reputation of the Seals as very tough guys you just don’t mess with. They could kill you as easily as look at you. But he said he realized that eventually someone was going to find out that the owner was not a Navy Seal. Then, of course, all the advantage of the sticker would be lost. Again, Paul is making the same argument. You can change the outside, but if nothing changes on the inside, the advantage won’t last long.

In verse 7 Paul continues his arguments. “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?” We might imagine the 1500-meter race at the Olympics, and one runner having another elbow in ahead of him, throwing him off his stride. Paul says, “I promise you that whatever they say, God is not the author of such things.” The pressure to join their tribe does not come from God, although they will tell you it does.

From the race metaphor in verse 7 he goes to the kitchen in verse 9. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” That’s a proverbial statement that he also uses in 1 Corinthians 5. In that passage the argument is about evil and unrighteousness. “Wickedness” he says, “will eventually spread if you allow it to remain in the community.” Here he’s using the proverbial statement about bad theology. Just as evil practice spreads, so does bad theology. If we begin to live only for what can be measured on the outside, then eventually everybody else will begin to live that way, too.

I’ve had a concern about parents’ being under a lot of pressure to raise perfect children. The question is, do you want the most well behaved ten-year-old in history, or do you want a mature person when the child is grown up? In order to enforce the best possible behavior at every moment in the life of a ten-year-old, you have to pay far too much attention to externals and too little attention to what is going on inside. You can achieve your goal and lose the child, if the child infrequently sees in his parents a love for God, a courageous faith, or enthusiasm to worship rather than work. What your children see in you, and what matters most to you, is what they will learn from you. If what they see is your crossing every “t,” dotting every “i,” thriving on every performance, then they haven’t seen much of grace, of promise, of Christ. It’s a terrible pressure to be under. That’s the kind of effect Paul is saying a performance-driven lifestyle has in the church.

Finally we come to verse 12, which I mentioned at the beginning. Paul essentially wishes violence upon those who are undermining the faith of the Galatians. There are a couple of important things to say about this. First, this is hyperbole. He is not genuinely wishing anyone to be castrated. It’s similar to when Jesus said, “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away” (Matthew 5:29a). He wasn’t talking about literally taking your eye out. While hyperbole, it is also serious. This is intended to be a hard, aggressive saying.

Second, back in verse 10 Paul refers to “the one who is throwing you into confusion...whoever he may be.” Paul doesn’t know the people of whom he’s speaking. It is not individuals but proponents of a point of view toward whom he is antagonistic. It is a lie against which he is arguing.

The apostle obviously recognizes the existence of a state of war. That is important for us to recognize as well. Paul spent the earliest part of his encounter with Christians persecuting them. He said in 4:29, “But as...he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.” The child of the flesh will always persecute the child of the Spirit. Paul cheered Steven’s execution by stoning. He went across the world he knew to capture young and eager believers and lead them off in some cases to death and imprisonment. He knew what it was like to persecute Christians, and he also knew what it was like to receive persecution for being a Christian. He says at the end of this book in a great statement that we could easily overlook, “Let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (6:17). He is talking about scars from beatings and floggings. He knew it was dangerous! He knew that ultimately the world would not embrace the truth, that it was going to fight back.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” He didn’t say, “You are going to wake up someday and realize you have no enemies.” You’re always going to have enemies. God has enemies. People are dug in as hard as can be, determined to thwart his love. It is a war.

At the heart of Paul’s concern is the cross. What he is saying is, “The cross represents the execution of Jesus, which is about our sins, our inability to save ourselves, our need for a Savior and for the love of God. If I would not preach the cross, nothing bad would happen. But I will preach it and it will happen. Therefore, since we are in a war, the world should lose and we should win, because we are speaking the truth of God!”

These observations give no warrant for the pursuit of selfish advantage. Paul never said, “I shouldn’t suffer for my failures.” He never wanted the best of things for himself. He never defended his rights. But where he did get passionate and where he did resist with everything in him was when the cross of Christ was at stake. When he saw his Savior bleed and die for him and that the enemies of God were minimizing that, nullifying it, shutting up the message, then Paul was a pit bull. “Nobody will take this from the center of what it means to be a child of God! Let them be maimed. Let them go to hell. Let them suffer the consequences. Nobody can destroy the witness of the cross of Christ, because by it I have been saved! By it the world has been saved! This is the love of God.”

Since Jesus’ death has broken your chains and his resurrection has granted you life, don’t be a slave again. Don’t let anybody turn you into a beast of burden with a yoke on your neck! You are a child of God, so act like one. Whatever threats they offer, whatever persuasions, you don’t have to listen. Stand firm!

## NOTES

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, ©1994. NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 397.
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, ©1982, Bantam Books, New York.
3. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, ©1992, Doubleday, New York.

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