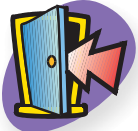


Galatians



A New Kind of Freedom

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church



Introduction

St. Paul has impressed us with the energy of his relentless attack on the false teaching of the Judaizers. When many of us would have run out of steam, St. Paul labors on to make absolutely *sure* nothing of their argument remains standing. In chapter 4, he communicated his shock that a Christian, who enjoys the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life and the joy of divine sonship, would want to take a step backwards into the slavery of the Mosaic law. To be able to respond to God with love (“Abba! Father!”) instead of fear is a gift worth preserving above all else. Mingled in with shock was the pain St. Paul experienced by being rejected by his dear friends. He tried to stir up the love they once felt for him in the hope of reviving their confidence in him. He wanted them to treasure their freedom as true sons of Abraham and true sons of God.

In chapter 5, St. Paul makes a slow transition away from the arguments about circumcision. He begins to address the deepest concern he has for the Galatians. He already expressed it in **4:19-20**, but now he will urgently devote himself to it for the rest of the epistle. What is it? St. Paul is anxious for the Galatians to experience spiritual growth, for Christ to be “formed” in them. As he develops this part of his letter, a profoundly important question starts to take shape. It is well for the Catholic student of Scripture to pay very close attention to it. The logical, reasonable question one should ask, having gotten this far in St. Paul’s letter, is this: “If justification (being pleasing to God, in a state of grace) comes through faith and not through circumcision or keeping the law, how does it happen? Is it by one act of faith, in which God forgives me all my sins, gives me His Holy Spirit, and writes my name in His Book of Life in heaven? Can one act of complete surrender to God accomplish everything?” These questions form the core of the debate between Protestants and Catholics over the nature of justification. Since the time of the Reformation, in the 16th century, Christian opinion has been divided over whether justification is begun, continued, and completed by a *life* of faith or whether it is a one-time, never-to-be-repeated *act* of faith *alone*. Can a Christian lose his justification or not? If one makes a distinct, conscious act of faith in the gospel, is he so changed by it that he will *inevitably* receive the reward of heaven? So many questions!

In his last attempt to dissuade the Galatians from being circumcised, St. Paul makes his most serious warning. As he has already demonstrated, a return to any part of the law is a return to the whole law. This will have catastrophic consequences for them (**5:1-12**). Paul contrasts the slavery of the law to the freedom we have in Christ. But this freedom is not only *from* something; it is *for* something. St. Paul’s clear pastoral concern in the letter now is not to battle heresy; rather, it is to encourage his readers to continue their life in the Holy Spirit. He knows full well what this controversy over circumcision is rooted in and what it has done to the life of the community. He addresses both of those in this chapter (**5:13-end**).

Read through the entire chapter, all at once, then answer the questions that follow.

GALATIANS 5

- 1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
- 2 Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again





GALATIANS 5 (cont.)

to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. **6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.** 7 You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? 8 This persuasion is not from him who calls you. 9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump. 10 I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. 11 But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! 13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another. 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26 Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another.



Questions on the Text

A SERIOUS WARNING READ GAL. 5:1-12

1. ***Why does Paul make a comparison between receiving circumcision and submitting to a "yoke of slavery" (vs. 1)?***
2. ***For those who seek to be justified by the law, what will become of their relationship with Christ (vss. 2-4)? Why?***
3. ***In vs. 5, Paul says that as we live by faith through the Spirit, we "wait for the hope of righteousness." What do you think he means by that? What is it that we have now in Christ, and what are we still waiting for?***
4. ***There are some who say that a person cannot fall from grace, that "once saved, always saved." How would you use this section of Paul's letter to refute that idea?***
5. ***Look carefully at vs. 6. Paul's entire letter up to chapter five has been taken up with combating the temptation the Gentiles were facing to return to the Mosaic legal code, represented by circumcision. He has powerfully demonstrated the weakness of that legal system. This verse could very easily serve as a summary statement of the whole epistle. Circumcision doesn't matter; it is "faith working through love" that really matters to Paul. When he wants to put what really matters as simply and as forcefully as he can, he says that it is "faith working through love." This is a critical point in the debate between Catholics and Protestants. Because Paul is completely focused on the most essential***





Questions on the Text (cont.)

thing in the Christian life, we recognize this statement to be extremely important. Notice that Paul does not say, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but faith alone.” Surely if he had meant that he would have written it at this moment. What is the difference between “faith alone” and “faith working through love,” which is what Paul did write?

6. *What metaphor does Paul use to describe the Christian life in vs. 7? Read also 1 Cor. 9:24-27 and 2 Tim. 4:6-8. (Historical note: Paul’s second letter to Timothy was the last one he wrote before his martyrdom).*
7. *Notice that in vs. 7, Paul asks, “who hindered you from obeying the truth?” Why do you suppose he uses the word “obeying” rather than the word “believing”?*
8. *What hope does Paul express for his friends in vss. 8-10?*
9. *Apparently, some of Paul’s accusers were suggesting that he was being double-minded, preaching circumcision among Jewish Christians, in order to ingratiate himself with them, but changing his tune when among Gentile Christians. How does Paul answer that charge (vs. 11)?*

Note: Vs. 12 might look like pure ugliness on Paul’s part, but the actual translation is “castrate themselves,” metaphorically suggesting that the enemies would no longer be able to reproduce themselves, thus bringing this heresy to an end.

10. *In these verses, Paul has used strong language to describe the problem the Galatians are experiencing — “Christ will be of no advantage to you,” “you are severed from Christ,” “you have fallen away from grace,” “who hindered you from obeying the truth?” Does all this provoke any questions in you?*

A NEW KIND OF FREEDOM—LIFE IN THE SPIRIT READ GAL. 5:13-END

11. *In vs. 13, Paul returns to the idea of freedom (see 5:1). How is Christian freedom different from the world’s idea of freedom (vs. 13)?*

Note: It is clear from vs. 14 that Paul thinks of the moral law as distinct from the ceremonial law. We have no obligation at all to the ceremonial law (circumcision, dietary laws, animal sacrifice, etc.), but the moral law provides the framework for our lives in the Spirit, as he will show throughout the rest of the chapter. Recall the words of Jesus: “I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it” (Matt. 5:17). You might be interested to see a comment by St. Augustine on this verse: “It might also be asked why the Apostle here speaks only of love of neighbor, saying that this way the whole Law is fulfilled..., when in fact charity is perfect only if one practices the two precepts of love of God and love of neighbor...But who can love his neighbor, that is, all men, as himself, if he does not love God, since it is only by God’s precept and gift that one can love one’s neighbor? So, since neither precept can be kept unless the other be kept, it is enough to mention one of them” (Ex. In Gal, 45).

12. *Look at vs. 15. What impact has this controversy over circumcision had on the love the Galatians have for one another? Why would this worry Paul?*
13. *Paul has made it very clear in this letter that it is the presence of the Spirit in our lives that proves we are God’s beloved children. What tension will everyone who seeks to “walk by the Spirit” (vss. 16-17) face in this life?*





Questions on the Text (cont.)

14. *In vs. 18, Paul says that whoever is led by the Spirit is “not under the law.” Some have suggested that this verse means that once we are Christians, it is not our obedience to rules that matters but our faith in God’s grace. Do you think that’s what Paul means here?*
 15. *Look carefully at each word in the list of works of the flesh in vs. 19-21. If a term is unfamiliar to you, look it up in the dictionary. Does anything surprise you about this list? Why do you suppose Paul writes such an explicit, detailed list like this?*
 16. *Is Paul saying, at the end of vs. 21, that if you struggle with anger or selfishness, you will not inherit the kingdom of God?*
 17. *Look at the quality of life produced by yielding to the Spirit instead of the flesh (vs. 22). What do you suppose the phrase “against such there is no law” means in vs. 23?*
 18. *Paul says, in vs. 24, that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” See also Gal. 2:20. Does this mean that we are no longer troubled by them? Why do you suppose Paul says that at this point in the letter?*
 19. *In vs. 25, Paul says “if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” How are those two things different from each other?*
 20. *In vs. 26, why do you suppose Paul is concerned about these particular problems?*
 21. *Sometimes it can look like a long road out of the works of the flesh and into the fruit of the Spirit. Does Paul give any clues in these verses about how a person can successfully walk by the Spirit and not cave into the works of the flesh? List as many as you can.*
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Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God’s word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. *The freedom Christ has given us is not only freedom from the condemnation of the law but also from the tyranny of sin. Because we have been initiated into Christ, the old sinful nature, which ruled our lives, is dead. It cannot control us any more. Are there places in your life where you are not living in the joy of that freedom? Is there anything in this lesson that can be of help to you?*
2. *When all is said and done, St. Paul sums up the law in one word: love. Think about the people in your life right now—family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, strangers. Do any of them need to be loved better by you? Ask God to make you free enough to do that.*
3. *To walk by the Spirit is to experience tension in your soul. Where is that tension most present now for you? What can you do about it?*





Opportunities for Additional Study

For the student who wishes to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, consider these:

Points to Ponder

Any serious student of Scripture who gets to chapter 5 of Galatians cannot avoid thinking about the Great Divide in Christendom over justification. Catholics and Protestants line up on either side of the debate, each confident of being correct and each baffled by the density of the other side. That stand-off has persisted for centuries, but in recent years there has been a thawing of the ice which froze each side into its position in such a way that communication was virtually impossible. On October 31, 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a historic document called the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). It was the result of nearly 30 years of discussion of the topic. Although it has been misunderstood and misrepresented by some on both sides, a patient and careful reading of it reveals it to be a work of genuine respect and helpful clarifications.

Much of the heat in the Catholic/Protestant debate on justification comes from a misunderstanding of the terms used on each side. The JDDJ painstakingly sorts out what these explosive terms mean and what they do *not* mean to those who use them. For example, the Lutherans who signed the JDDJ (and not all Lutheran groups did) were willing to say that saving faith is not faith all by itself:

We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ. By the action of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, they are granted the gift of salvation, which lays the basis for the whole Christian life. They place their trust in God's gracious promise by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him. Such a faith is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works. But whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it. (25)

What does this mean? It means that if the word "faith," by definition, *includes* hope and love, then to say we are saved by faith-love-hope alone is not problematic from the Church's perspective. This actually is a change from Martin Luther's teaching on "faith alone." In his commentary on Galatians, Luther wrote:

They [the Catholic Church] say that we must believe in Christ and that faith is the foundation of salvation, but they say that this faith does not justify unless it is "formed by love." This is not the truth of the Gospel: it is a falsehood and pretense...For faith that takes hold of Christ, the son of God, and is adorned by Him is the faith that justifies, not a faith that includes love. For if faith is to be sure and firm, it must take hold of nothing but Christ alone...Just as our opponents refuse to concede to us the freedom that faith in Christ alone justifies, so we refuse to concede to them, in turn, that faith formed by love justifies.

(*Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, *et al.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955; vol. 26, pp. 88-90)

The Lutherans who signed the JDDJ agreed to a definition of faith that removed the Church's anathemas placed on Luther's rigid position.

Protestants, from the time of Luther, have opposed the Catholic teaching that humans must cooperate with the Holy Spirit in their justification. To them, that sounds as if men contribute something to their salvation, which Lutherans (and the Scriptures) say is untenable. The JDDJ makes this clarification:

We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God's judgment and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God's grace. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together it is true to say:





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

When Catholics say that persons “cooperate” in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God’s justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.

According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (mere passive) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one’s own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God’s Word. (19-21)

As should be obvious by just these examples, the JDDJ is a serious attempt by Catholics and Lutherans to break through the wall of hostility, misunderstanding, and vitriol that 500 years of history have built up. It is important to note that, in the document, the Catholic Church does not retract its position or invalidate the anathemas of the Council of Trent:

Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.

Nothing is thereby taken away from the seriousness of the condemnations related to the doctrine of justification. Some were not simply pointless. They remain for us “salutary warnings” to which we must attend in our teaching and practice. (41-42)

The document does not cover every issue involved in the doctrine of justification, nor does it address all the differences between the Catholic and Lutheran teaching. It must be remembered that many, perhaps most, modern American evangelicals would not sign this document. Still, it remains a hopeful sign that where there is the *will* to listen and think together over the tragedy of the break in the Body of Christ at the time of the Reformation, much good can be accomplished.

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Gal. 5:1 – “...By his glorious Cross, Christ has won salvation for all men. He redeemed them from the sin that held them in bondage. ‘For freedom Christ has set us free.’ In him we have communion with the ‘truth that makes us free.’ The Holy Spirit has been given to us and, as the Apostle teaches, ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’ Already we glory in the ‘liberty of the children of God.’” (1741)

Gal. 5:6 – “Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy: ‘Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith.’ To live, grow, and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be ‘working through charity,’ abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church.” (162)

“Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself. By faith ‘man freely commits his entire self to God.’ For this reason the believer seeks to know and do God’s will. ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ Living faith ‘works through charity.’ (1814)

Gal. 5:16 – “Etymologically, ‘concupiscence’ can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the ‘flesh’ against the ‘spirit.’ Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sin.” (2515)

Gal. 5:19-21 – “In this sacrament [of penance], the sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. For it is now, in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin. In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and ‘does not come into judgment.’” (1470)

Gal. 5:22-23 – “The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: ‘charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity.’” (1832)

Rome to Home

“For the Apostle [Paul] it is not a matter of despising and condemning the body which with the spiritual soul constitutes man’s nature and personal subjectivity. Rather, he is concerned with the morally good or bad works, or better, the permanent dispositions—virtues and vices—which are the fruit of submission (in the first case) or of resistance (in the second case) to the saving action of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Apostle writes: ‘If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.’” (John Paul II, *DeV* 55)



Summary

Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. A return to circumcision and the law of Moses (the first inevitably means the second) would be a return to slavery for the Galatians, a move that would take them out of the system of grace under Christ and into a system of works, which would mean condemnation for them.
2. St. Paul told the Galatians that circumcision (to have it or not to have it) is not the focus of the Christian life. Rather, the central meaning of Christian living is faith working through love. They had understood this once, when he first taught it to them, but the teaching of the Judaizers was presenting a hindrance to their progress.
3. The call of the Christian life is a call to freedom from the law and the power of sin for a new kind of servanthood—to the law of love.
4. St. Paul warned the Galatians that their Christian lives were being threatened not only by heresy but also by the divisions among them caused by the heresy. They could be severed from Christ by embracing circumcision, but they could also lose their inheritance of the kingdom by giving themselves over to “works of the flesh,” passions which were being stirred up by the circumcision controversy.
5. The Galatians needed to learn to walk by the Spirit into Christian maturity. They had begun new life in the power of the Spirit; they had to press on to overcome the temptations to live in the old way, subject to the kinds of sin the Mosaic law revealed but could not vanquish.
6. In particular, they had to guard against the kind of sin that is especially easy to fall into when divisions appear among Christians over what is true—“Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another” (5:26)

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

