

THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS



Catalog No. 1254
 Galatians 5:1-12
 Ninth Message
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 January 18th, 2004

In the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, Andy is a prominent New England banker who, although he proclaims he is innocent, is convicted of murdering his wife and her boyfriend. He is sent to the maximum-security state prison at Shawshank, Maine. An introvert, he doesn't make many friends until Red, a 30-year veteran of the system, decides to take him under his wing. The movie centers on their 20-year friendship.

In one scene, Andy and Red are sitting with their backs against the wall of the cold prison. Andy has already decided he is going to try to break out. They are talking about freedom, what life would like out of Shawshank. One would think that both men would long to out of prison, but Red has been inside so long he has grown accustomed to prison life. He is tired and no longer even tries to impress the parole board at his hearings.

Andy wants to go to Mexico and buy a little hotel. He dreams about starting a fishing business. He looks at Red and says, "You know, I could use a guy who knows how to get things." Red replies, "I don't think I could make it on the outside. I've been in here most of my life. I'm an institutional man now." Andy says, "I think you underestimate yourself." Red responds, "No, I don't think so. I mean, in here I'm the guy who can get things for you, sure! But outside, all you need is the yellow pages. I wouldn't know where to begin. The Pacific Ocean? That would scare me to death, something that big. Andy, I don't think you should be doing this to yourself. This is all pipe dreams! I mean, Mexico is way down there, and you're in here, and that's just the way it is!" Andy says, "Well, I guess it comes down to a simple choice really, to get busy living or get busy dying."

We all feel like that at times. There is only one Master in all the world whose enslavement liberates. But freedom can be scary. Grace makes us uncomfortable. We know that the only way to become a Christian is by faith, but sanctification, the process of growing in Christ, confuses us. That was the Galatians' problem. They had found Christ by faith—or he had found them, to put it biblically—but they thought they grew in Christ by trying harder. They did not understand that we can't gain any more approval from God by what we do. He already loves us not matter what we do, because we are in Christ. God sees us as he sees his own Son. This is the truth that the apostle Paul wants us to grasp in chapter 5 of Galatians: the freedom that we have in Christ.

Chapters 3 and 4 form the theological portion of this book. Paul argues passionately that salvation, sanctification and glorification are all by faith. In the story of Abraham he demonstrated that faith has always been God's solution to man's sin. Now he appeals to the Galatians to respond to this truth. He begins with an assertion, a declaration, and follows with a command.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1 NASB)

The first half of this verse is a summary of all that Paul has been saying so far. The NEB puts it this way, "Christ set us free, to be free men." We were slaves, and Jesus Christ is the redeemer. Our conversion was an act of liberation; the Christian life is a life of freedom. Paul is talking about our conscience. We are free from the tyranny of the law, free from the frustration of struggling to please God by obeying his commandments.

We have been forgiven and cleansed. We have a new identity. We are children of God, adopted into his family. We belong permanently to him. With his loving gaze we can hear our heavenly Father sing over us: "This is who you are in my eyes. This is how much you mean to me. Any other message you receive contrary to this has no validity." Any message that contradicts this, from any source—abuser, neglectful or absent father, smothering mother, rejecting spouse, rebellious child or betraying friend—has no validity.

We can hear the Son sing his song of grace as well: "You are my beautiful bride. I will bring you home. You are now clean. You can come into the Father's presence in the new and living way that allows formerly unholly people to approach absolute holiness, without fear." We can now draw close enough to hear him sing. That means that every accusation we hear that tells us we cannot rest, that we must strive to be better, that we are unworthy or unwanted, that we don't belong, is a lie. Stand firm in that freedom, says Paul. Don't let yourself be subject again to a yoke of slavery. The minute you allow any legalism into your life it becomes a heavy, enslaving burden. Returning to that cruel pedagogue would be insane. So he urges the Galatians to stand fast.

Next, Paul moves from the general exhortation in verse 1 to the specific issue in verses 2-4, which is circumcision.

Behold 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. (5:2-4)

These false teachers in Galatia were saying that new Christian converts had to be circumcised. Their message was, "Unless you are circumcised and keep the law you cannot be saved." So they were declaring that faith in Christ was not enough for salvation. Christians had to keep certain rules as well. This was no minor issue involving a slight surgical procedure or a little ceremony. Circumcision represented a religion of human achievement, a religion of good works. That's why Paul was so upset. The Judaizers were implying that Moses needed to finish what Christ had begun. As Paul puts it in verse 4, they were seeking to be "justified by law." If you are want to be justified or sanctified by keeping the law, says the apostle, then you are going to have to keep every law in the book. There is no escaping it. The law is one unit. If you break one law you have broken them all.

Taking that route of salvation by human achievement leads to disastrous results. Paul's word to those who were considering being circumcised is, "Christ will be of no benefit to you...You have been severed from Christ...you have fallen from grace." If they try to mix law and grace they fall away from grace as a principle. He is saying that if one believes in a salvation by works, then Christ is no benefit to him, because a relationship with Christ is available only through the realm of grace.

Here is how John Stott put this:

To add circumcision is to lose Christ, to seek to be justified by the law is to fall from grace. You cannot have it both ways. It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby acknowledging that you cannot save yourself, and then receive circumcision, thereby claiming that you can. You have got to choose between a religion of law and a religion of grace, between Christ and circumcision. You cannot add circumcision (or anything else, for that matter) to Christ as necessary to salvation, because Christ is sufficient for salvation in Himself. If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ. Salvation is in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.¹

We can't have it both ways. We can't have a little grace and a little law. It is all or nothing at all. The minute we add even a little law then it all depends on us. But it doesn't depend on us: how much time we spend in the word, how many verses we've memorized, how regimented we have made our lives or how consistent our quiet time. Those are good things, but they are merely the means of grace. They help center us on grace, to lay hold of more of it. If we slip up on those, that doesn't set us back. The important thing is to center

on Christ, to rely on him, because he is the source of power in our lives.

The word "fallen" in verse 4 is a nautical term meaning "to drift off course or to run aground." Believers get deceived at times. We drift from the principle of a grace life and allow ourselves to be placed under law. God loves us unconditionally, but occasionally we are seduced into thinking that he expects certain things from us in return. Imagine how sad God must feel when we trade Christ for living under law. Living under grace as sons of God is Christ-centered; living under law is self-centered. Living under grace allows Christ to supply our needs and grant us his resources; living under law shuts down those channels and puts all the burden on us.

In the next couple of verses Paul reveals what authentic Christianity looks like in contrast to the bogus imitation which the false teachers were propagating. Galatians 5:5 is one of the most significant verses in the New Testament. It is pregnant with truth. Every word is important.² This is the verse that instructs us how we can be who we want to be, which Paul will elaborate on in the next passage. It is a good verse to memorize and reflect on.

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. (5:5-6)

First, the apostle gives the source for our life in Christ: it is the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we gain the righteousness for which we hope. The Spirit brings home to us the love of God. As Paul puts it in Romans, the Spirit has poured into our hearts the love of God. The Spirit reminds us that God loves us. He loved us even when we were unworthy of that love, when we were his enemies. He loves us now when we are his friends and we are still unworthy of it. He can't stop loving us. No matter what we do or don't do he can't stop liking us. It is the Spirit of God who assures us of that love. He is the one who cries within us, "Abba Father," giving us that sense of intimacy with the Father. And it is the Spirit who produces the fruit in our lives, as we will see later in the book.

The means is our faith; that is all we have to give. And ironically, even that is a gift, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians. We can't even conjure up faith. It is God who works in us to give us the faith to cling to him. That is all faith is: asking, counting, depending, trusting in him. It is not believing things that are hard to believe. It is relying on God, and then taking a step towards whatever it is that God wants us to do, knowing that underneath are the everlasting arms, that he is working in us "to will and work for his good pleasure." So the means is faith.

The process is waiting. By faith we are waiting for the hope of righteousness. Our sanctification is a process. Growing in grace does not happen overnight. Some of

us are perplexed when God doesn't change us immediately. We recognize the deeply ingrained habits we have struggled with over the years and get discouraged. Stories of immediate deliverance confuse us. God works that way at times, but not always. We struggle with bad habits for years. My nemesis throughout my Christian life is my stubborn desire to control. God has been patiently and persistently dealing with this area and the fears that underlie that behavior.

We don't work for it, Paul says, we wait for it. We don't strive anxiously to secure it, imagining that we can produce righteousness if we try hard enough. Isaac Walton said, "It is the fiddler and not the fiddle stick that makes the music." Waiting is part of the process. Growth is rarely swift and painless. It is often subject to delay. Our personalities resist change, flawed as they are by nature and our own indulgence. In spite of our failures we can be assured that our conversion is going on every day. We are in recovery, gradually being delivered from evil. God is working even now for that distant end. We are becoming today what we shall inevitably be. So we must wait for God's silent molding, wait for his full unfolding. We must believe that God's processes are adequate to deal with our sin. As a friend of mine put it, we must be comfortable with ourselves in the process. We see so much that remains to be done, but we are under construction. The job is not done. We are in the middle of the story. But the process is inexorable.

So we wait. But the end is sure, because we are "waiting for the hope of righteousness." "Hope" in Greek has no thought of contingency, unlike English. We might hope for a raise this year, or hope we don't lose our job. Hope for us has an element of uncertainty. But in the NT, hope is a future certainty. It can be translated that way in every case. That is what God has in mind for you and me. One day we will be exactly like Jesus. That is what we long for. The promise is that one day we will be like that, but not in this life. That is what John says in his first letter: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1-2 NIV)

We don't look like sons of God now, and at times we don't act like that, but we are, and one day we will be like him. This is our incentive to get up and keep going when we sin—because we know that we will be like him. One of these days we will be revealed in all of our glory, without one blemish. You can count on it! That's what we focus on. So what if you failed this week! Just keep falling forward, because one of these days you are going to be just like God's Son.

That is a wonderful summary of what sanctification looks like. The source is the Holy Spirit, the means is

faith, the process is waiting, and the product is righteousness.

Paul goes on to say that righteousness is not mere correctness. It's the difference between being right and being good. There is a winsomeness, a beauty about the righteousness produced by the Holy Spirit that is unlike any human righteousness. Paul describes it this way.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. (5:6)

In other words, nothing natural will work. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love. The only righteousness that matters is the supernatural righteousness which the Holy Spirit produces in us, and that can be summarized in one word: love. The Christian life is not only a life of faith; it is a life "in the Spirit." As we will see in the next couple of weeks, the Spirit's role is to change us from being self-centered into being other-centered. Paul will go on to say, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (5:13). That is the righteousness that characterizes us. Paul will spell that out in the next passage in what he calls the fruit of the Spirit.

There is a shift in emphasis beginning in verse 7. Paul has been talking about the practice of true Christianity versus legalism; now he is going to talk about the preaching, the proclamation of it. He directs his thoughts to those in Galatia who were teaching others that they could produce out of their own efforts the righteousness that God requires. Observe the change in the pronouns used. In verses 1-6, the pronouns were "you" and "we"; *you* being the false believers who wanted to add circumcision to faith, *we* being the true believers who were content with Christ alone and faith alone. The pronouns in this next section contrast the false teacher, "he" who is troubling them, and "I," referring to Paul, who is a true teacher.

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. (5:7-9)

Paul had taught them pure grace, but these Judaizers taught that while it is all right to believe in Jesus, because he is the Messiah, in order to be true Jews they had to be circumcised; then God would accept them fully. "You were running well; who hindered you?" asks Paul. The apostle liked to use the metaphor of a race to describe the Christian life: "You were running well." They were enjoying their freedom in Christ, but someone had put an obstacle in the way. Legalism not only does not help you, it is counter-productive. It will actually prevent you from obeying the truth. The only true path to obedience is faith.

And it wasn't God who put that obstacle in their way: "This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you." No one in the OT was saved by faith plus

works. It was always pure faith. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough": the legalism of the false teachers was beginning to permeate the whole church. That is why Paul is so angry. It is a very serious matter to teach legalism. He goes on to say in verse 10 that the one who is troubling the church will be judged.

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 would even mutilate themselves. (5:10-12)

Apparently these false teachers started a rumor that on occasion, the apostle preached that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul asks, "If that were true, why am I still being persecuted?" Remember what we said last week: Ishmaels will always persecute Isaacs. Legalists will always attack those who understand grace and faith. Paul says it's obvious that he was still preaching grace because he was still being persecuted. The reason we will be attacked is due to the "stumbling block of the cross." The cross will always offend people. It says to those who are counting on human achievement to be saved, "You can't do it! God had to do it." We all want to be able to prove ourselves, but the cross says that we can contribute absolutely nothing. That is why people get so angry over the "stumbling block of the cross."

The cross makes a judgment on human life. When we say we believe in the cross, we are admitting that God substituted himself for our wickedness. The sinless One died in our place. The cross condemns our righteousness. It says we are sinners in need of a Savior. Our abilities and intellect and good works are deeply marred and therefore worthless. That is the word of the cross. So it is an offense to those who are perishing, a crude, absurd attack on their pride. But to those who are being

saved, the cross is the key that opens the gate to all of the blessings in life. It is the way to experience forgiveness, healing, wholeness, peace, joy and freedom.

So Paul says in verse 12, "Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves." Luther translated this phrase, "I would like to see the knife slip." Paul's anger is obvious. Legalism takes all the joy out of life. Churches that preach legalism are depressing, joyless places. How can people return week after week only to get hammered by the law? If you have Christian friends who are part of a legalistic community, pray for them and look for opportunities to share this message of deliverance.

Paul expresses great optimism that this error will not triumph. Verse 10: "I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view." In other words, no other view than the one he had taught them and they had originally embraced. What a great statement! Paul was always saying things like that. He told the Philippians, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). Paul was so confident because he knew that this was God's work. If it were up to us, he could have never been that confident; some people would fail along the way. But he knew that these believers would grow because God was at work—and God doesn't begin any project that he doesn't complete.

That is Paul's encouragement to us today: Keep on believing, keep on trusting, and one of these days we will have the righteousness for which we hope.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 133-134.

2. I am indebted to David Roper for his insight into this verse, in his message *All or Nothing at All* (Cole Community Church, Boise, Idaho, March 2, 1991).