*There is a story about a man who had to cross a wide river that was frozen over. He was deathly afraid the ice might be too thin, so he began to crawl on his hands and knees in great terror, thinking he might fall through the ice at any moment. Just as he neared the opposite shore, shivering and exhausted, another man nonchalantly drives past him in a snowmobile pulling a sled loaded with firewood.*

*Isn’t this just like the Galatians? They were saved, but by choosing the law as a way of relating to God, they will always be walking on legalistic thin ice, trembling at every step, wondering if they did enough, wondering if they were good enough, when the truth be told – the ice is completely solid. The finished work of Christ is rock solid, and He is more than able to carry the weight of those who believe. The Galatians were free to walk confidently in Christ – but, they are not.*

Last week in Chapter 5, we began looking at a few of the problems that Paul mentioned would be a consequence of choosing the way of the law. He said that by returning to the law as a way of relating to God and earning His love and favor, it invalidated the finished work of Christ on the cross. In other words, Christ will be of no value because you are not fully trusting Him. In essence, you are suggesting that Christ is not enough and you have to do more.

The second problem of returning to the way of the law is the obligation to it. Once a person submits to one part of the law, he or she is obligated to obey the whole law. There is no “cherry picking” allowed.

And lastly, Paul explained that a third problem of returning to the way of the law is that it removes a person from the influence of grace in their lives. The way of grace is how we are to function in this life, it’s how we relate to God, and when you add the law to Christ, you subtract from grace.

So, those were some of problems mentioned by Paul from last week when embracing the law as a way of relating to God through self-effort and self-reliance. This morning we are picking up where we left off and we are going to look at some additional problems and the solution to the problem. Let’s start with **Galatians 5:7-10**.

**7You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? 8This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. 9A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. 10I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. 11But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. 12I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.**

If you noticed, in these verses, Paul brings up another problem of returning to the way of the law – it hinders one from obeying the truth and moving forward in their spiritual growth. By using the image of a foot race, Paul describes a runner who was doing well on the race course, making progress, until someone cut in and knocked the runner off their stride. This is what the Judaizers had done to the Galatian believers by leading them away from the truth – the way of grace, and back to the way of the law.

And just for clarification sake, it’s important to note that Paul is not using the image of the foot race to tell people how to be saved. He is talking to believers about how to relate to God and to live the Christian life. We do not run the race to be saved; we run because we are saved and want to fulfill God’s will in our lives.

*This teaching is near and dear to my heart because I was a legalist early in my Christian walk, and here’s the thing – my motives seemed good, I wanted to follow God, I wanted to be more spiritual, but the legalistic ideas I had embraced were not biblical. I wanted to gain God’s favor, I wanted to earn His love and His forgiveness, and I was so miserable because I was still fighting with a sin nature – I was a constant failure – so how could a holy and righteous God ever accept me? In my mind, my relationship with God was based on my performance, not on my position in Christ. And there was a time when I considered taking my own life, as a believer, because I could not measure up and I could not fathom that God actually desired me. It took me a while to understand that God’s love and favor and forgiveness were already mine by His grace in Christ.*

Where did my legalistic thoughts come from? I don’t really know, but it probably did not take much to send me down that miserable road, and I suspect this is why Paul refers to another common image in the Bible, that being yeast and how a small amount can grow to permeate the whole lump of dough. In the Bible, yeast is typically used negatively in illustrations to describe how small subtle bits of sin, and in this case, a small bit of false teaching can contaminate a believer or an entire church for that matter.

Now just as I accepted the truth, Paul believes that the Galatians will come to their senses and get back on the race course, but as for the Judaizers who are not from God and are not teaching the truth – they will experience God’s judgment. Then Paul asks a question in **verse 11** that is a little confusing to me.

**11But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.**

I wasn’t entirely sure what Paul was saying here, but it seems that some were still accusing Paul of requiring circumcision, which is really mind-boggling to me. Sure, as a former Pharisee, Paul was very legalistic and preached circumcision, and as I mentioned last week, Paul had Timothy circumcised for another reason, but if Paul was still preaching circumcision as a means of gaining a right standing with God, then the Judaizers would have been singing his praises instead of persecuting him. It would be illogical for the Judaizers to persecute Paul in one hand, and in the other hand allege that he agrees with their doctrine. Obviously, Paul refutes this, because it makes absolutely no sense, and then he points out the truth – the cross is offensive. It’s the cross that has become a stumbling block to them.

Why would the cross be so offensive? Why would it be a stumbling block?

Because of its irony. To the Jews, the cross was an instrument of suffering and torture and punishment and death, it was perceived as a curse from God, and ironically, God used it as the instrument of salvation. But there is something else to consider. The cross was also offensive because it set aside the law as a way to relate to God and gain a right standing with Him. The cross offered salvation by grace through faith alone without adding the law to the completed work of Christ. The cross was a stumbling block because people would rather trust themselves.

So, if Paul was preaching the need for self-effort and self-reliance to gain God’s favor, he would not be persecuted by the Judaizers and the cross would become nothing more than a historical event and no longer an offensive stumbling block.

**Verse 12** is an interesting passage. Paul says, “**I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.”**

Paul has already said the Judaizers would be judged by God, but here in this verse it would seem that Paul is mocking the Judaizers, and in essence he says, *“If you accept circumcision and the legalistic rituals and rules as being necessary to earn God’s love and favor, you might as well go for the gusto – go all out, and just castrate yourself. Cut it all off, since that would surely impress God.”*

It’s kind of funny, but his point is clear. You can’t add anything to the finished work of Christ. Outside of Christ, you cannot earn God’s love and favor, you cannot gain God’s approval and acceptance, and you are not in a right standing with God based on your own religious self-effort. You and I are only declared righteous by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

So, now that we know all of this – so what? Well, let’s look at **verses 13-15**.

**13For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “****You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.**

As I mentioned last week, believers are called to freedom. As someone once said, “*freedom isn’t free*” and Christ graciously paid the full price for our freedom. Grace and freedom go together, and those in Christ, those who have genuinely accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior by grace through faith are set free. But Paul gives us a caution and command about this. He says, **“do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.”**

We are prone to extremes on almost any issue, and the issue of freedom is really no different. There are two extremes when it comes to the subject of Christian freedom. One of those extremes we’ve been talking about for several weeks. It is legalism, where freedom, for the most part, is rejected and replaced with rules and regulations and a message that *“you had better cross your ‘T’s’ and dot your ‘I’s’ or else God is going to get you.”* This is the false teaching from the Judaizers to the Galatians and the reason for this letter by Paul.

Now, the other extreme of freedom is license – which is just the opposite of legalism. Here the believer thinks – now that I am saved, I have a license, I have an excuse to live like I really want to live, and this is the fear of the legalists who do not understand the grace of God. They say, *“If you do away with the rules and regulations of the law, people will just take their fire insurance and go live like the devil.*  That concern is valid, but not because grace failed – people do.

Our gracious freedom should never be used as a license to sin for a couple of reasons. First, that exaggeration of Christian freedom would bring to question the genuineness of one’s salvation, and secondly, it leads you right back to another form of slavery – slavery to sin. Jesus said in **John 8:34, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin,”*** meaning, if your life is characterized by sin, if living in sin is your practice in life, if you are habitually walking in it – then you are a slave to sin. Our gracious freedom should never be used as an excuse or a license to sin – instead, Paul says, our freedom should result in love and service to others.

If you noticed, Paul quoted **Leviticus 19:18** that says, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** He quotes the law, which brings up a good point. Paul is not against the law, and we should not dismiss or ignore the law either – it is the Word of God, but it has to be used for the purpose it was intended – something the legalistic Judaizers could not grasp. Remember, Paul said in **1 Timothy 1:8**, that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.

Then Paul tells us something amazing – the whole law is fulfilled in one word – love. For example, if you love someone, you won’t steal from them. If you love someone, you won’t lie about them. If you love someone, you won’t try to hurt them. In Christ, our gracious freedom gives us the opportunity to fulfill the law at its highest level with a selfless, sacrificial and serving love. Love changes everything, it changes our heart, and it changes our motivation for service.

*Suppose I was the king of Clark County and all of you were my subjects. All of you serve me in some form or fashion, and as your king, you have to obey me – or else. Essentially, you serve me out of compulsion and fear. You have to gain my approval, and you have to earn your benefits and rewards from me. Now, I also need to point out that I am a single king, I have no queen by my side.*

*One of my servants is named Trish. She is a baker in my kingdom, and she makes the best apple pie in all of my kingdom. Every Friday after dinner, I want a piece of apple pie, and it had better be good. Trish has tried to teach others how to make her pie, and others have tried to replicate what she does, but for some odd reason, it’s just not the same. Hers is the best in my kingdom, and every Friday after dinner, I want a piece of her apple pie, and every Friday, Trish brings me a piece of her apple pie – or else.*

*Over a period of time, after getting to know Trish, I fall in love with her and she falls in love with me, and I take her as my wife and make her my queen.*

*So, here’s the question. Do I still get her apple pie on Friday? She knows I like apple pie on Friday, and both of us know she makes the best apple pie in the kingdom – no one makes this pie like she does. Do I get apple pie from Trish? I believe the answer is “yes” I still get her apple pie, but not out of compulsion or fear or to earn my approval – instead, her apple pie is now made for me as an act of her love for me. Her motivation for making the pie has completely changed.*

Love changes everything, and in the same manner, because God first loved us, in our response, we love Him, we obey Him, we follow His Word, and we serve others. Our motivation is changed. Its love in our hearts, which we experience as a result of God’s love and grace and forgiveness towards us, that makes the difference. This is how King David could say in **Psalms 40:8, *“I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart.”***  Because of David’s love for the Lord, obedience was no longer burdensome or a drudgery – it was his delight.

Finally, Paul says in **verse 15**, that without love, we end up biting and devouring each other, which I think is applicable for churches today who are struggling with reopening under this pandemic.

In **Romans** **14:1-3**, Paul gives some wise counsel to believers. He says, ***“accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.”***

That instruction to avoid judging one another can only be done under the influence of love, and if I might borrow a paraphrase from a pastor friend of mine, he says,

*“The one who believes we should resume worship gatherings immediately must not look down on the one who does not, and the one who believes we should wait must not condemn the one who believes we should start, for God has accepted him.”*

Instead of biting and judging one another, we should love and encourage and support one another whether we agree on the reopening issue or not. Jesus said, ***“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** By this, God will be truly honored and glorified in our community, not by opening or closing doors, but by how we love and serve one another.

*I want to share a story with you this morning. A pastor said, I love my family. It takes no effort to love them. My heart beats smoothly and easily with joy and love for them. As I left my home early Sunday morning, I left with a warm glow in my heart as my wife and I had babysat our 4-year-old granddaughter on Saturday. I thought of her often as I traveled on Sunday.*

*The day of travel was very difficult with numerous flight cancellations and long waits at the airport. Finally, I boarded a Frontier Airlines flight at 8pm. All I wanted was to get to my destination in Indianapolis. I sat in Row 3 in the center aisle seat. A young man of about 25 years old, sat down in the seat directly in front of me. He was not the kind of guy you want anywhere near you when you travel. He talked loudly to anyone and everyone near him. His comments were crude and crass. I was glad he wasn’t in my line of sight because that meant he wasn’t talking to me. Was he on drugs? Drunk? Everyone was in their seats but the door to the plane had not yet been shut. The pilot’s door to the cockpit was still open and we could see the pilots sitting doing whatever they do as they go through their checklist.*

*This young man did something very unwise. He took a comb out of his pocket and leaned out into the aisle and pointed it toward the cockpit as if it was a gun and said loudly, “Bang, Bang, I got those pilots dead in my sights.” Yes, you heard me right. The whole section went silent. He didn’t stop with that either. He said that if he were a terrorist, he could take over the cockpit. A man in front of him turned around and told him he had better stop this stuff, but that only encouraged him to get louder. He began to say crude comments about this man. The man got the flight attendant and thus began a rather interesting conversation. She then went and got the pilot, and the pilot tried to calm him down. Once the pilot left, the man started up again. Finally, a lady called for the pilot to come back and demanded that this man be removed. Thereupon the pilot called for security to come on the plane. It was at this point that the man must have realized that he had gone too far. He slumped back and said, “OK. I won’t say another word. I will just go to sleep.” But it was too late for that. Security entered the plane and told him to get his bag and he was escorted off. Do you know what we all did? We clapped and hooted. I was genuinely happy to see him go. It would have been a long flight to Indianapolis with that jerk sitting in front of me.*

*I settled back to relax and read as I flew to Indianapolis. It was several minutes later that it happened. I don’t remember what I was doing when it happened. Maybe I was thinking about my next sermon. But suddenly I had a touch from God. It was one of those moments when you sense that God has tapped you on the shoulder and a thought comes rushing in. Do you know what thought pushed into my brain? “Cliff, you didn’t pray for that man that was kicked off the plane.”*

*My response was normal, I think. “No. I didn’t. He was a jerk and deserved everything that happened to him.”*

*When the next thought came – I knew it was from God. “You know how much you love your granddaughter!” I responded that I did love my granddaughter greatly. God said, “I love that man just as much.”*

*And I was taken aback. And I felt a blush of embarrassment. Of course, I should have prayed for that man. But I had been caught up in the normal reactions of a normal human guy sitting on a plane being harassed by a less than lovable man. But God has set me free by his grace and love. He has forgiven me. He has changed my perspective about life. He has asked me to love others.*

*I give you this story to challenge you and to challenge me. Gracious freedom in Christ includes love to others.*

Source Material:

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Bible Study Commentary, Galatians – Curtis Vaughan

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