

Warning from the Gospel¹

Galatians 5:2-14

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Americans love to ignore warnings. We are so arrogant that we often rebel against a warning, simply to do so.

Look at some of the examples on the screen.

From our text this morning, our greatest danger is none of these. The warning from the gospel is of something entirely different and for many, wholly surprising.

Two important commands form the backdrop for the rising alarm of our text this morning:

Stand firm in the freedom Christ gives. You must believe and long for the freedom Christ has saved you to. You must believe His promises and receive His grace as sons to live freed from the power and slavery of sin.

Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Do not return to the seeming safety and sure slavery of legalism or religion.

Freedom is the call of Galatians because God wants you to be free. As Paul declares in verse one, “for freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to yoke of slavery”.

But freedom has an enemy. His name is legalism, and he’s a tyrant who would love nothing better than to have you bend your neck to his enslaving yoke.

What is legalism? We talk about it all the time and so a simple definition would be this: legalism is treating that which is good as though it were essential. Whenever Christians turned something valuable into something ultimate, legalism is at work and freedom is forfeited.

Legalists lose sight of what ultimately counts. They start thinking that the nonessentials are essential; they begin to insist that good things are in fact necessary. And the result is that they look with pity or suspicion on anyone who would think or do otherwise.

The Judaizers, the agitators, sought to convince the Galatians that circumcision ultimately counts. And evidently this tactic was persuasive enough to cause the Galatians to lose sight of what ultimately counts and thus want to get circumcised.²

Realize What is at Stake (v. 2-6)

This passage begins the third section of the letter. After defending his apostleship (chaps. 1–2) and his message of justification by faith (chaps. 3–4), Paul now applies that doctrine to practical Christian living (chaps. 5–6), emphasizing that right doctrine should result in right living. His subject is the sanctification that should result from justification. The life of genuine faith is more than the belief in divine truth; it is also the bearing of divine fruit.

¹ This manuscript is an adaptation of a sermon written by Pastor Russ Kennedy and preached at Clearcreek Chapel in 2007.

² Todd Wilson, *Galatians, Gospel-Rooted Living*, (Crossway, 2013), 171-172.

Paul's objection here is not to circumcision in itself. Paul's warning about circumcision pertained only to the false idea that in itself it carried spiritual benefit or merit. The Judaizers were saying, in effect, that faith in Jesus Christ, although important, was not sufficient for complete salvation. They taught that what Moses began in the Old Covenant and Christ added to in the New Covenant had to be finished and perfected by one's own efforts—the centerpiece of which was circumcision.

The Purpose of Real Warnings

As we work through this paragraph, we first must ask ourselves a question. What is being warned of?

The function of these texts is **not** to tell us that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation. We know that the Scriptures tell us that we are born into God's family and placed into God's hand. There is no one or nothing that "unborn" us or remove us from God's hand. We are kept by the power of God until the last day.

The function of these texts is to *warn those who profess faith of the grave dangers of returning to works* in the Mosaic System (or any works system, for that matter) so that we will not attempt to be justified by works but by faith.

The Problem with Turning to Works

(v. 2-4)

So what is the problem if you begin to lean on works to be accepted by God? Four warnings here are designed to cause you to hold fast to faith and rest only on the saving work of Christ alone.

Nullifies Your Benefit in Christ

(v. 2)

You will not receive the benefits or the advantages of Christ. If you rely on works you are not relying on Christ. It is that stark. All the people to whom Paul was writing had made a profession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord or they would not have been part of the churches of Galatia. Many, perhaps most, of them had genuinely trusted in Him for salvation. The truth Paul presents here applied to both groups. To those who were not saved, he was saying that they could not be saved, they could not gain any eternal, saving benefit from Christ if they trusted in circumcision. To those who were saved he was saying that such behavior was inconsistent with their salvation and that certainly they could experience no benefit of growth in their spiritual lives if they began trusting in circumcision in addition to God's grace.³

Makes You Accountable to the Whole Law

(v. 3)

A second consequence of trusting in circumcision is that the person who does so obligates himself to keep the whole law. To live by part of the law as a means of attaining righteousness demands living by all of it.

James writes, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point," James says, "he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10).

Because God's standard is perfect righteousness, fulfillment of only part of the law falls short of His standard

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Galatians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 133–134.

If you do any work ordered by the Law or any work in addition to the Law, you are then responsible to everything single thing the Law demands in attitude and action every moment of your life, past and present. You have to be as good as God. Period.

You Are Severed from Christ

(v. 4a)

A third consequence of seeking to be justified by circumcision or any other form of the law, is that it causes a person to become severed from Christ and thereby become fallen from grace.

It is an interesting play on words that Paul uses the term severed while speaking of circumcision isn't it.

If we try to do it ourselves, will we will be left to fend for ourselves. We won't have Christ's blood, so we won't have Christ's life, and we won't have Christ's grace. All we will have is our sinful, silly, little, dissatisfied self, which isn't all that much comfort.

We know we've lost sight of what ultimately counts in the Christian life when we begin to lose the joy of living the Christian life. This is a telltale sign.⁴

Have Fallen from Grace

(v. 4b)

Finally, we have this concluding and summarizing sentence as a final and fearsome warning. If you rely on works you have fallen from grace.

Applied to one who was really an unbeliever, the principle of falling from grace has to do with being exposed to the gracious truth of the gospel and then turning one's back on Christ.

Applied to a believer, the principle of falling from grace has to do with a person who genuinely trusts in Christ for salvation but then outwardly reverts to a life of legalism, of living under external rituals, ceremonies, and traditions that he carries out in his own strength, instead of living with a spirit of obedience to Christ.

We are not teaching that you can lose your salvation. We are warning you to hold fast to faith and rely solely on the work of Christ alone so that you will continue in faith and not turn back to works.

The Proof by New Covenant Truths

(v. 5-6)

Now, how does Paul prove that this is true? In verses 5-6 he shows the essential expectant nature of saving faith. And Paul could not be clearer. Saving faith is primarily believing in what Christ has done for us on the cross in view of, in the assurance of, standing before God righteous on the last day. This is the point of verse 5. What the Spirit does in those who are the sons of God is to so focus their faith that it expectantly hopes at the final judgment we are declared righteous before God based on His righteousness alone.

The legalists were saying, it is fine to begin the Christian life by trusting Christ, but if you want to be completed in righteousness, you need to go beyond faith and do some works of merit, beginning with circumcision. So in Paul's opposition to this in 5:5 he very boldly

⁴ Todd Wilson, *Galatians, Gospel-Rooted Living*, (Crossway, 2013), 173.

says, there will be no perfection in this life. Full and perfect righteousness lies in the future. It is our hope not our possession.⁵

This verse totally does away with any mixing of the righteousness of Christ and our own as in some way or in some fashion being the grounds of my right standing before God.

The only thing that matters now, is faith working through love (v.6). This is the heart of the gospel in its effect on people. Saving faith expresses itself through all that love is. This is Paul's balance. While there is no work, even works of faith, that are the grounds of salvation, **real faith will express itself**, will work through the love.

Reject Error's Destructive Persuasion

(v. 7-12)

Destructive errors do not appear out of nowhere. They are taught by people. Those people and the errors they teach need to be exposed. But Paul recognized what is often true. Those who teach the errors have won the affection and even admiration of those being misled. Thus we have the language and the tone of this paragraph.

The Effect of their Teaching

(v.7-9)

Paul describes the effect of their false teaching in three ways with three metaphors.

You were running well" – you were shot out of the blocks by the Spirit, and you were relying on him every step of the way for guidance and power. But this new turn you've made – God didn't teach you to make that turn; and if God didn't, you know who did! (v.7).

As in rhetoric or debate, they have been persuaded by voices other than those authorized by God (v.8). The false teachers are retraining the ears of the church and thus their ability to discern truth. They are arguing for a competing position. This is the same thing we saw in the Garden when Satan questioned God's words, integrity, and motives.

The Galatians were being tempted to think that what Paul was saying was not relevant to them. I hear this often in counseling when sharing the Scripture through phrases like, "Well that is just your interpretation;" and "I don't think that text applies to my situation."⁶

And, a little legalism in one area of life will soon destroy one's entire life. They have allowed a little bit of error to expand to where it now threatens the whole (v.9). What might appear to be small compromises to error will later grow and permeate the whole. Any error in the doctrine of salvation will contaminate and corrupt a whole system. Once leaven is in the bread, how will you remove it?

The Affirmation of their Judgment

(v.10)

Verse 10 expresses Paul's confidence that the new believers in Galatia will agree with this letter and turn back to faith, and his confidence that those who go on teaching legalism will be judged.

His confidence is in the Lord. It is the Lord who will hold them to the truth. He is confident that they will take no other view than his.

⁵ John Piper, *Our Hope: Righteousness*, Sermon preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church, June 1, 1986.

⁶ Ibid.

God is able to sustain us all the way to the end. He is able to pour grace into our hearts in such a way that we remain “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, (1 Corinthians 15:58), even to our last breath.

His confidence in the Lord includes an assertion of impending judgment. While he has generally up to this point spoken of false teachers in the plural, he now speaks of “one” and “his” in the singular.

Not to warn the Galatians about this would be like trying to get someone to step off the railroad track to smell the beautiful honeysuckle but not telling them a train is coming. Paul warns people that judgment is coming.⁷

The Attack on their Influence

(v.11-12)

I wonder if someone has been teaching that even Paul teaches circumcision. If that is the case, Paul here vehemently denies that charge. If Paul is preaching the same thing the Judaizers are teaching, then why the conflict?

And, if Paul’s teaching is in agreement with theirs then the cross has no offence. It cannot be a stumbling block.

To those who live by grace, the cross is good news of great joy. To those who live by the law, the cross is a stumbling block because it takes away the boasting by their works.

This paragraph closes with one of the most shocking statements from Paul. He wishes that those who are teaching circumcision would go all the way and just emasculate themselves. Of course, if they did so, they would be disqualified from serving under the Law. They would become a shame in their culture.

Here is how deeply Paul felt about the gospel and hated the dire threat to it from false teaching. Do we have anywhere near this sort of love for the gospel? Or are we afraid to confront our, so-called brothers and sisters in their theological mess.

Respond by Lovingly Serve One Another

(v. 13-15)

What do we do then if those who are in Christ are no longer under the law? Are we then allowed to simply live anyway we want. Since we are free then are we free to do anything?

The Problem that Freedom Poses

(v.13)

If we are not careful, we take our freedom and use it to justify our sin. I often hear the phrase, “I am a recovering legalist.” to justify all sorts of licentious behavior.

Do not use our freedom from the Law as opportunity to commit sin. Romans 5-8 are crucial to expanding on this simple problem and its necessary correction. Just because there is no law requiring you to be here on Sunday’s, don’t allow your freedom to indulge the flesh in sleeping in. So this is the challenge. Any truth can be twisted and perverted to serve sinful aims and agendas.

The Principle that Limits Sin

(v.13-14)

Since we are free then we must use that in love to serve one another. This is the principle that limits sin. All holy conduct is built on two commands, love God and love neighbor. Our freedom from sin and the law releases us to extravagant acts and deeds of self-sacrifice and love for others. It does not free us to serve ourselves. Why? Because when we, through love serve one another, this is faith expressing itself. A claim to faith that does

⁷ Ibid.

not produce love for others is a false and feigned faith. But true faith looks away from the realm of flesh and self-seeking behaviors for the good of others and the glory of God.

Reflect and Respond

So how will we respond this morning? Let me call you to these heart changes.

Do you believe the gospel?

- Do you come to Christ by grace through faith alone?
- Have you rejected all works and religion?

Do you love the gospel?

- Do you realize what is at stake?
- Do you reject error's destructive persuasion?
- Do you respond by lovingly serving one another?

Do you live the gospel?

- Does the gospel shape your relationships?
- Does the gospel cause you to serve others?