STAND FIRM IN CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Galatians 5:1–15

Key Verse: 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 teaches us to live in the grace of Christ. In today’s passage Paul proclaims that living in this grace is real freedom. But it’s not easy. On either side of this road of grace there’s a pit. On one side, it’s the pit of legalism; on the other, it’s the pit of self-indulgence. It’s so easy for us to fall into either pit. But constantly living in the grace of Christ enables us to avoid them both. We’ve been learning through Galatians that living in the grace of Christ requires faith. Today’s passage also shows that it leads us to a life of love. This is the truth of the gospel. We especially want to accept Apostle Paul’s warning to stand firm in Christian freedom. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

 Paul has been making a metaphorical contrast between the children of Sarah and Hagar (4:21–31). Sarah’s children are those who put their faith in God’s promise; Hagar’s are those who try to keep laws. Sarah’s children are free; Hagar’s are slaves. Based on this metaphor, Paul draws a conclusion. Read verse 1. Probably the key part of this verse is that “Christ has set us free.” What does it mean? It’s not freedom from present-day, real-life slaveries, such as slavery to studies, to a job, to a mortgage or student loans, to burdensome relationships, to human responsibilities, or to a system. Christ isn’t going to set us free from these things. But he does give us spiritual freedom. What is this freedom? In Galatians Paul has been putting it another way, using the word “redeem.” To be redeemed means to be bought back from slavery and set free. Christ redeemed us, or bought us back, from the curse of the law (3:13). Christ redeemed us so that we might live under God’s blessing as people of faith, people who live by the Spirit (3:14). Christ redeemed us so that God might adopt us as his children (4:5). These statements help us understand the freedom Christ gives. He gives us freedom from the law. He gives us the freedom of the Spirit. He gives us freedom as true children of God. It’s an inner freedom, freedom from constantly living under guilt, freedom from constantly trying to prove ourselves with our own efforts, freedom from always feeling inferior or doomed to failure.

How did Christ redeem us and set us free? In Galatians Paul has repeatedly been mentioning Christ’s death on the cross (1:4; 2:20; 3:1,13). Christ redeemed us, set us free, through his death on the cross. Christ was crucified so that all our sins might be forgiven. Christ was crucified so that he might pour out God’s grace on us. Christ was crucified to pay the price for all our sins. Christ was crucified for us to convince us of God’s love. Only the grace of Christ, shown through his death on the cross, can ever set us free.

But how does it actually happen? In Galatians Paul has been saying that we receive the grace of Christ only by faith (2:16,20; 3:7–9,11,14, 22–26). When we hear that Christ was crucified for our sins, all we need do is believe it. When we truly believe in the grace of Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit (3:2,5). It’s so simple. And receiving the Holy Spirit changes everything. The Holy Spirit makes this freedom in Christ real to us (Ro8:2; 2Co3:17). The Holy Spirit convinces us that our sins really are forgiven. The Holy Spirit sets us free from all guilt and any lingering sense of condemnation. The Holy Spirit assures me that I have a deep love relationship with God, that God really is my true Father and I really am his child, that I can come to him freely and call out to him at any time (4:6). The Holy Spirit also helps us see the point of God’s law, which is to love God and love others. The Holy Spirit frees us from all kinds of legalism. The Holy Spirit frees us to actually be able to love. Christ set us free to enjoy this spiritual freedom.

Read verse 1 again. Here Paul admonishes us to “stand firm” in this freedom that Christ gives. The word has a military mood to it. It means to be as immovable as a soldier, ready to fight to defend one’s position. Paul himself has been fighting in this letter for true freedom in the grace of Christ. Now he wants the Galatians and us to also be fighting to defend and live in this Christian freedom. We can understand the need to fight for human freedom. Our country has a long history of fighting for freedom, freedom from Great Britain, freedom from Southern slavery, freedom for human rights. But why do we need to be fighting for spiritual freedom in Christ? In Paul’s case, it was because the truth of the gospel was at stake. If he didn’t fight for this freedom, Judaizers would have succeeded in forcing Gentile believers to basically become Jews. In our case, it doesn’t seem that anyone is forcing us to become Jews. But we need to be fighting to live in the grace of Christ for many reasons. Sometimes, people can be putting invisible pressure on us to live up to their expectations. Sometimes, we can be putting pressure on ourselves to live up to our own expectations. When we give in to these pressures, we start creating rules and laws for ourselves to obey, and when we do, we start losing our Christian freedom.

What can be confusing about living the Christian life is the spiritual disciplines involved. These spiritual disciplines are really good: worshiping God in a community of believers, praying, reading and studying the Bible, tithing, giving to the needy. If we stop doing these things, our spiritual life dries up. In UBF we have some other distinctive traits: testimony writing and sharing, teaching the Bible one-to-one, intentionally living humbly, early morning prayer and Daily Bread, and conferences. They’ve been such wonderful spiritual disciplines that have helped so many people practically to grow as disciples of Jesus. But all these spiritual disciplines can easily morph into rules and laws by which we’re trying to earn God’s favor. When we start relying on these disciplines instead of purely on the grace of Christ, we start losing our spiritual freedom. The disciplines are meant to be means to an end, to help us grow deeper in the grace of Christ; they’re not meant to be ends, in and of themselves. To be growing in the grace of Christ, we all need to be practicing spiritual disciplines. But these disciplines should never become absolute rules, as if they’re more important than the grace of Christ, as if they could ever take the place of the grace of Christ. To stand firm in Christian freedom, we need to be practicing spiritual disciplines to keep us in the grace of Christ and help us grow in the grace of Christ. Disciplines are not the end goal, they’re the means; the grace of Christ is the end goal.

In verses 2–4 Paul is saying that when we make other rules and laws more important than the grace of Christ, we start relying on our ability to keep rules and laws. When we do, Paul says we stop “valuing” Christ and his grace. If we’re only strictly keeping rules and laws, there’s a great spiritual danger: Paul says we can even be alienated from Christ and fall away from grace. We always need to be living by faith in the grace of Christ alone, not depending on ourselves, our abilities and willpower, or any system of rules and laws to keep us safe.

Read verse 5. Paul again mentions the Spirit. He says it’s only through the Spirit that we “eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” What an interesting expression! What does it mean? Paul’s talking about the gift of righteousness that God gives to all those who lived by faith in Jesus. We actually receive righteousness right now, when we believe in Jesus who died for our sins. But in another sense, we haven’t received our righteousness yet; we’ll receive it in the end, when we see Jesus someday in person. Why does Paul write this way? He wants to emphasize that we never earn righteousness in this world, no matter how hard we struggle and strive; righteousness is always a sheer gift of God’s grace that we hope for, with the Spirit’s help, only by faith in Jesus.

Paul goes on to debunk keeping laws like circumcision. Read verse 6. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Paul is telling us in these words what we should be striving for. We should be striving to have real faith in the grace of Jesus, a faith that expresses itself in love. Love for whom? Love for God, yes, but probably especially love for others. When we think of people, our first thought should not be of how we can be getting them to keep rules and laws; our first thought should be how we can be showing them God’s love, a love that sacrifices ourselves for them. Verse 6 is telling us that if we have no love, we should be asking ourselves if we really have any faith.

In verses 7–10 Paul wants to redirect the Galatian Christians into the right course: to run the race of faith in the grace of Christ. This, to Paul, is what it really means to “obey the truth.” Legalistic people were confusing them and were a bad influence like yeast, causing people to puff up with pride and self-righteousness. But Paul had confidence in the Lord that God would help them have a gospel-centered point of view. In verse 11 he mentions persecution. It tells us that if we preach legalism, we can please many kinds of people. But when we preach the offense of the cross, we’ll surely be persecuted. Why? It’s because people are too proud to repent and depend only on the grace of Christ.

In the last three verses of today’s passage Paul warns about the other pitfall that endangers us from living in the grace of Christ. Read verse 13. Here, “the flesh” means “the sinful nature.” So many people misunderstand that grace is a license to sin. They think that grace means they don’t have to struggle against sin, that they can enjoy all kinds of self-indulgence in the name of grace. It’s a gross misunderstanding. Christ sets us free not so that we can indulge our flesh, like a pig returning to its vomit (Pr26:11; 2Pe2:22), but so that we can serve one another humbly in love. In verse 13 Paul is especially emphasizing that our serving one another in Christ has to be humble and loving; it can’t be condescending, or just out of duty. Again, it’s a goal we need to be striving for. This is what living in the grace of Christ actually looks like: serving one another humbly in love. It should start not with strangers but with those closest to us, our roommates, our spouse, our coworkers, believers or non-believers.

Read verse 14. Here Paul is quoting from the Old Testament, and especially from what our Lord Jesus himself said about the law (Mt22:39,40). In a sense, we should be strict about loving others as we love ourselves, not strict about lesser laws that don’t really matter. Read verse 15. We wonder why Paul suddenly starts talking about biting and devouring each other. It’s probably because this is what a legalistic mentality does; it makes us constantly critical. Legalistic people tend to be very strict with others but very generous with themselves. Living in the grace of Christ means to be very strict with ourselves and very generous with one another. Sadly, so many Christians are not known for love and grace, but for super-strict moralism and self-righteousness. May God help us to have a reputation as those who practice his love and grace.

Let’s read verse 1 again. May God bless us to experience the grace of Christ that sets us free. And may God enable us to stand firm in this spiritual freedom and express our faith by serving one another humbly in love.