

Galatians 14 – Legalism, License or Love
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We are in a study of Galatians called “Freedom Through Christ.” Up to this point in this letter Paul has confronted the Galatians for turning from believing that Christ and the cross were enough for salvation and for believing they had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. He has rebuked them and he has lovingly appealed to them to return to the truth that they are sons of God by grace, not slaves to the law. That culminated in the verse that sums up the message of Galatians - Galatians 5:1 which says:

It is for freedom Christ has set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Jesus died so that we could be set free from the bondage of the law. He died to set us free from trusting in our own works to become righteous or right with God. We must decide to trust in Christ and never go back to trusting in the law ever again.

The heart of Christianity is freedom. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Christ has set us free from sin - but we must stay free. Christ has set us free from legalism - but we must stay free.

Paul says we have been set free, but we must stand firm and refuse to be yoked in slavery again. Notice that **Christ sets us free – we don’t free ourselves!** Our part is to stand firm – to remain in freedom and don’t move off it. Then – we must resist the yoke of slavery.

I remind you that a yoke is a carved piece of wood that is fitted to the shoulders of two animals (usually oxen) and it binds them together. It is used to control and guide animals so they are more effective. The stronger animal would carry most of the weight of the yoke forced the weaker animal to follow the stronger one. According to Romans 6:16-18 we are all slaves.

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin... you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

So we must resist the yoke of slavery to sin or the law. Instead we must be yoked to Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-30

Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

When we “take His yoke,” we are bound together with Christ. And when we are yoked with Christ - He is determining the direction we go, the speed we go, and He is providing the power to go! Being yoked with Christ is a good thing because Matthew 11:30 says: ***For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.***

Contrast being yoked to Christ to being yoked to the law. I taught you earlier in this series about the first church council in Jerusalem and they determined that believers were saved by the grace of Christ of the law of Moses. In Acts 15:10-11 Peter said:

Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? No! We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.

We must choose to be yoked to Christ not the law!
We must choose to be saved by grace not by our works.

Since Paul said not to be yoked again to the law, it must be possible to go back to slavery once you’ve been set free. An example of this would be someone who get sets free from an addiction, but then relapses and falls back into the slavery of addiction. In Galatians, Paul has shown us that we find and keep liberty not by working for it, but we find it by grace through faith in Christ.

Now Paul moves from the doctrinal part of his letter to the practical. He does this in most of his letters. That’s because believing precedes doing. Today I’m preaching a sermon entitled Legalism, License or Love.

Now – regarding the law – there are two main yokes that Christians can submit to that lead to slavery: legalism or license. Or we can choose to be yoked to Christ and that keeps us in freedom.

I want to give you some definitions. Legalism is trying to be righteous by your own works or keeping the law. Someone is not legalistic because they are disciplined or because they obey God. They are legalistic when they believe their works earns them salvation or a right relationship with God.

License – called licentiousness in some Bible translations – is believing that salvation is by grace, but then using grace as a right to sin.

Both legalism and license lead to bondage – one to sin and one to law. Only Christ brings true liberty. **Love is the ruling principle of Christian liberty.** Love gives unconditionally and unselfishly serves God and others.

In our next passage in Galatians, Paul puts these three choices before us: Legalism, License or Love. Our choice will define us and it will drive our behavior. In the passage I am teaching on today, Paul gives us 3 facts about legalism, 3 facts about license and 3 facts about love.

In this passage, Paul talks a lot about circumcision. Before I read this passage, I want to remind you that in the Jewish faith, circumcision is not an optional thing like it is for us today. Parents who have their infant sons circumcised usually do so for medical reasons, not spiritual reasons. But in the Jewish faith, circumcision was the sign that you followed Abraham and obeyed the law of Moses.

So – when you hear the word circumcision in this passage think legalism – the belief that your works make you right with God. Galatians 5:2 says:

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

1- If you look to the law for salvation, Christ will profit you nothing.

The Galatian Christians had been deceived into believing that there was a spiritual significance to circumcision. They thought it would add value to their faith. But Paul consistently taught that our works add zero value to salvation.

Remember, the Galatian error was trying to combine faith and works for salvation. They thought that what began in the Spirit was completed by the flesh. But actually – Christ is the Alpha and Omega of our faith. He is the beginning and the end. What He starts He finishes! Galatians 5:3 says:

Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

2- If you look to the law for salvation, you must obey the whole law

You cannot pick and choose which parts of the law to obey or disobey. You must keep it all – every rule, regulation, feast and sacrifice.

And the problem with the law is that we cannot keep it all. We all sin and there will be consequences for that sin.

If you are ever pulled over for speeding, it will do no good to argue that you are a good person, a faithful spouse, a taxpayer, and you have obeyed the speed limit many times. All of that is irrelevant. You are still guilty of speeding and you have broken the law! James 2:10 says:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

That's why no one can be justified by keeping the law because they cannot keep it all. Some people think they are strong Christians because of their legalism. But the opposite is actually true!

3- If you look to the law for salvation, you fall away from grace

Law and grace are mutually exclusive. There are not two ways to be saved: by works or by grace. There is only one way – by grace through faith in Christ is that one way.

In fact, trying to mix law and grace obliterates grace. True salvation is Christ plus nothing. True salvation is all Christ or no Christ! That's why Paul says in Galatians 5:4

You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Some people believe that the phrase “fall from grace” means to lose your salvation. But Paul is speaking about people who turn from grace to legalism.

Falling from grace does not mean that if a Christian sins, they lose their salvation. To fall from grace is to fall into legalism. And legalism is to turn from grace as the principle by which you are made right with God. When you do that, you have fallen from the heights of the grace of Christ to the depths of self-righteousness.

If you want to try to make yourself righteous by your works, then you automatically remove yourself from the realm of grace. You are on your own and you will fail. True righteousness is by grace through faith.

Paul gives us an amazing definition of true righteousness in Galatians 5:5

By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

True salvation is by faith – through the Spirit – in hope. That is of the utmost value. What has no value is legalism.

Verse 6 says that what truly counts is ***faith working through love.***

We will talk more about love later, but for now I'll say this. Saying you have faith is one thing, but is your faith working? By that I mean that real faith has real results.

How do you know if your faith is working? By the way you love God and people. If faith doesn't work through love, it isn't real faith.

The Greek word translated work is *energeo*, from which we get the word energy. The Amplified Bible describes it as **...faith activated and energized and expressed and working through love.**

This reminds me of James 2:17-18

...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

James is not saying we are saved by works. He is saying that true faith will result in good works. And those works will be motivated by love for God and people.

In Galatians 5:7-12 Paul again confronts the Galatians and the legalistic Judaizers who led them astray. He says:

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the One who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."

Leaven is like yeast mixed in dough – a little bit affects the whole batch. It's the same way spiritually. False teaching has a way of spreading and causing great damage. Galatians 5:10 says:

I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.

Paul expresses confidence that the Galatians will come to their senses and return to the gospel of grace. Galatians 5:11-12 says:

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

The spiritual damage being done to the Galatian churches by the legalists was so great that Paul uses very strong words to make his point. Basically he is saying that those who are pushing for believers to be circumcised should go the whole way and castrate themselves. He is exaggerating the point to get the Galatians' attention so they understand how serious this is.

So – we've looked at 3 truths about legalism, lets look at 3 truths about license. Galatians 5:13 says:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature rather, serve one another in love.

1- Grace is not an excuse to indulge the flesh

This is a major error I see being taught today. So many people are turning truth of grace into license to sin. This error teaches that since we are not under the law – we are under grace – then it doesn't matter how we live. In Jude 4 – the brother of Jesus and James warned us about:

...godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

What is license? License is official permission for someone to do something. For instance – I have a driver's license. I have been given official permission by the state of Texas to legally drive an automobile. Spiritually, license is when Christians abuse the grace of God by thinking it gives them permission to sin without cost. But remember Galatians 6:7-8

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

There are always consequences for sin. The flesh is motivated to please self and that results in destruction. The spirit is motivated to please God and that results in life. Grace is not a license or a permission to sin. In fact, Romans 6:1-2 says:

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? Certainly not! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Not only is grace not a license to sin, but Titus 2:11-13 says:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The truth about grace is the exact opposite of what the false teachers were teaching.

2- Liberty is not freedom to sin, but freedom to not sin

Many people think that grace gives them the freedom to sin. But actually, it gives us the freedom to not sin. 1 Peter 2:16 says:

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as an excuse for evil, but living as servants of God.

3- Liberty is being free to serve

Paul said the purpose of liberty is not to be free to sin but to be free to serve God and serve people. As Jesus said in Matthew 20 – if you want to be great in God’s kingdom, learn to be the servant of all. Your flesh wants to be served. But the spirit of God and the spirit of grace wants to serve in love.

So let’s look at 3 truths Paul gives about love. We already saw one in Galatians 5:6
The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

1- Love is the way faith expresses itself.

How will the life of Christ in us be expressed through us? By love! Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-40

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.

That’s why Galatians 5:13-14 says:

Use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

2- Love fulfills the law

That’s one of the big differences between grace and legalism. In legalism – you can keep all the laws outwardly but not be motivated by love for God or people inwardly.

The sign that you followed Abraham was circumcision.
The sign that you followed Moses was keeping the law.
The sign that you follow Christ is love for one another.

Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians by our love. The early church won the world through love, not through legalism. And it should be the same with us today. If it’s not, bad things happen. That’s why Galatians 5:15 says:

But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

3- Lack of love is destructive

Without love we destroy each other and we destroy our witness. Think about it: if Christians destroy one another why would anyone want to believe in Christ?

Jesus prayed for us in John 17:23

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

What a profound thought! If we don't love each other and get along with each other, the world will not believe that God loves them and sent His Son to die for their sins.

Lack of love is destructive to our relationships and our witness. That's because faith works through love!

So I encourage you today to make the right choice.
Choose love over legalism or license!
Don't choose legalism and fall from grace!
Don't choose license and become yoked to sin.
Instead, receive the love and grace of God.
Choose love for God over love for sin or self-righteousness.