

STAND FIRM IN CHRISTIAN FREEDOM PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:1

August 29, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

In John 8:36, Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36). Christ did not set us free for the purpose of slavery but for freedom! This is the main truth that we have been discovering from Galatians 5:1. Christianity is freedom not bondage.

Paul has been arguing for this freedom in many different ways throughout this letter (cf. Gal. 2:4-5). In 2:4-5 he introduces the idea of freedom. Now here in 5:1, he brings it to the forefront of the discussion with this emphatic declaration: “For freedom Christ has set us free...” Paul’s actual call to freedom began in 4:12 (“Become as I am”). Next, having argued from the Torah that the Galatians are children of the free woman (4:21-31), Paul now exhorts them to stand firm in this immeasurable blessing.

In Galatians 5:1 Paul sets forth two key aspects of Christian freedom. First, Paul states the fact of Christian freedom, “For freedom Christ has set us free...” (v. 1a).

I. THE FACT OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST’S REDEMPTION WAS TO OBTAIN THE BELIEVER’S FREEDOM. V. 1A

A justified man is no longer a debtor to the law. He is free from its curse (5:3; 3:13). There was a time when we were under the “yoke of the law”—crushed beneath its demands which we could not meet.

However, the Good News, which Paul sets forth, is that Christ met the demands of the law for us. Through His obedience to the Law (Gal. 4:4) and through His sufficient sacrifice (Gal. 3:13), Jesus has brought an end to any notion of debt in our relation to God (see Michael Horton, *People and Place*, p. 299).

Jesus obeyed in our place and died in our place. Consequently, He met all of the law’s demands and bore all of the law’s curses in our place. The Christian is therefore free from being bound to give an infinite satisfaction for his own sins and to yield perfect and perpetual obedience as the condition of life.

Because there is no longer any debt relation to God, the justified believer cannot be condemned for his or her sin—since there is nothing to condemn! Paul reminds us in Romans 8:33-34, “³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Christ, through His life of living before the Father in the Spirit, gave Himself up for us—the guilty—as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2). Now, as a result of our union with Christ, our lives as well can be designated as a fragrant sacrifice before God (see Michael Horton, *People and Place*, p. 298). Accordingly, the aroma of Christ overpowers the stench of our sin, which clings to our best works (*Ibid*, p. 298). This is freedom!

In light of such a glorious freedom, Paul is then asking, “Why would you ever desire (4:9, 21) to place yourselves under the law and submit to its crushing yoke? Why would you turn from this and desire to obligate yourself to give an infinite satisfaction for your own sins and to yield perfect and perpetual obedience as the condition of life?”

Such a choice leads to slavery rather than freedom. Since then Christ has set us free, Paul exhorts us to “stand firm and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery?” This leads us to the second aspect of Christian freedom in 5:1.

LESSON:

II. THE RESPONSE: THE RESPONSE OF THE BELIEVER IS TO STAND FIRM IN THIS FREEDOM. V. 1B.

Paul appeals to the Galatians (and us!) to make every effort to continue in freedom and to turn away from every form of legalism. We are to trust in Christ’s work for us and to live by the power of the Holy Spirit in us. John Stott writes, “...we are to enjoy the glorious freedom of conscience which Christ has brought us by His forgiveness. We must not lapse into the idea that we have to win our acceptance with God by our own obedience” (*Galatians*, p. 132).

Throughout his letters, Paul exhorts his readers to stand firm in the faith. For example, in 1 Corinthians 16:13 Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers, “Be watchful, stand firm (στήκετε) in the faith, act like men, be strong.” To the Philippians, he urges, “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm (στήκετε) thus in the Lord, my beloved” (Philip. 4:1). To the Thessalonian believers, Paul commands, “So then, brothers, stand firm (στήκετε) and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

As we consider Paul’s imperative to “stand firm,” notice carefully what Paul implies in his imperative: Our response is not to work to gain our freedom. Rather, our response—duty—is to stand firm in the freedom that is already ours because of Christ’s satisfaction—both actively (Gal. 4:4) and passively (Gal. 3:13).

James Boice says that Paul’s imperative is an appeal “for an obstinate perseverance in freedom” (*Galatians*, p. 486). The “task of Christian ethics” is to preserve and continue in this freedom (Betz, *Galatians*, p. 257). This raises an important point that we touched on last week.

Due to the Fall, we have lost our freedom and become enslaved to the “yoke” of the law. We do not obey our way into freedom. We cannot free ourselves. Christ is the author and worker of our freedom (5:1a). True freedom can only come from outside of us. In Galatians 4:4-7, Paul shows how our freedom is obtained by the work of the triune God. God the Father sent the Son into the world in order to redeem us from our slavery in order to adopt us as sons—and so we are now free. And, He sent the Spirit into our hearts to assure us of our sonship and freedom (Gal. 4:4-7). The one who the Son makes free (Jn. 8:36) has freedom of access to the Father. This blessing is enjoyed by all who are adopted as sons (Gal. 4:6). This freedom then was obtained by Christ through His obedience (Gal. 4:4), death (4:5) and resurrection (1:1) is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who works life and freedom in us (cf. 3:2, 5, 14; 4:6). The fruit and possession of this freedom are bestowed upon us through the gospel by faith alone (cf. Calvin’s *Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 147).

As covenant breakers, we are in legal bondage to the law’s demands due to our sin (Gen. 3:6-7). We have lost the moral ability to obey—hence the law cannot free us (cf. Gal. 3:21). Because of our radical depravity, our desires are totally enslaved to our fallen nature. In our fallen state we possess a freedom without freedom, which is real moral bondage.

In his book, *The Bondage of the Will*—which Martin Luther deemed his most important work—the Reformer writes, “Let all the 'free-will' in the world do all it can with all its strength; it will never give rise to a single instance of ability to avoid being hardened if God does not give the Spirit, or of meriting mercy if it is left to its own strength” (p. 202). Thus, part of the freedom we are given is the freedom from our inability to obey (Gal. 5:13-15).

Again, Paul’s point of emphasis is that freedom does not come by way of keeping a list of rules and observing ceremonial codes (cf. Betz, *Galatians*, p. 257). Note Paul’s exhortation carefully, “stand firm therefore, and *do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*” (emphasis mine). The verb, “do not submit” (ἐνέχεσθε) is a passive and means, “to be loaded down with” (“ἐνέχω,” BDAG, 336). The word “yoke” (ζυγῶ) refers to the obligation of keeping the law of Moses (cf. F.F. Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 226; Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 216-217).

The picture Paul gives is of an ox loaded down by a heavy yoke (cf. “ζυγός,” BDAG, 429; Stott, *Galatians*, p. 132). Once the heavy yoke has been removed, the ox is able to stand upright again (*Ibid*, p. 132). In the same way, once the Lord frees us from the crushing yoke of the law, we too can stand upright (i.e., we can walk as free people and not as slaves). In Leviticus 26:13, the LORD declares, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.”

The Judaizers, however, were urging the Galatians to “take the yoke of the law upon themselves.” Since the Jews of Paul’s time, this was considered honorable and the essence of religion (Boice, *Galatians*, p. 486; Fung, *Galatians*, p. 216). In contrast to the

the Judaizers who viewed the law as a means of freedom, Paul understood life under law as submitting “to a yoke of slavery.” The essence of Christianity is not morality or ethics. Rather, the essence of Christianity is the gospel. Michael Horton writes, “The only thing that the church can provide to the world that is truly unique is the gospel” (*The Gospel-Driven Life*, p. 23).

In Acts 15:10, Peter speaking at the Jerusalem Council says, “Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Both Peter and Paul understood that all who are under the “yoke” of the law are loaded down by its crushing demand of “Do this and live.”

Article 5 in the *Canons of Dort* discussing the inadequacy of the Mosaic Law, states, “...For though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet, as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from his misery, but, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, and man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.”

Samuel Bolton in his book, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, writes, “The law is a yoke of bondage, as Jerome calls it. They who look for righteousness from it are like oxen in the yoke, which draw and toil, and when they have performed their labour, they are fatted for the slaughter. Likewise, when men have endeavoured hard after their own righteousness, they perish at last in their just condemnation” (p. 220).

Notice the word “again” (πάλιν) in Paul’s exhortation. The Galatians had never been under the Mosaic Law to begin with. Why then does Paul say “again?” Turn back to Galatians 4:8-9. The essence of what Paul is saying in 4:8-11 is: Once you were slaves. Now you are sons. How then can you turn back and desire to be slaves again?

Being wholly ignorant of a true saving knowledge of God, the Galatians were “enslaved to those that by nature are not gods” (v. 8). They were held captive to the “weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (στοιχεῖα, v. 9). The “elementary principles” constituted the Galatians former idolatrous religion, which operated on the principle, “Do this and live.”

Thus, Paul is perplexed as to why the Galatians who had been delivered from one unbearable yoke (paganism) would desire to become enslaved to another unbearable yoke (Judaism)! Paul warns the Galatians that if they submitted themselves to the demands of the Judaizers they would be enslaving themselves all over again to the “elementary principles of the world (i.e., “Do this and live”)!

The imperative, “stand firm” (στήκετε) means “to be firmly committed in conviction or belief” (“στήκω,” BDAG, 944.). Having once been enslaved to the crushing yoke of the law (Gal. 1:13-14), Paul understood first hand the need to stand firm in his belief of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone over against the pressures of the Judaizers. He obstinately stood firm in order to preserve not only his freedom but also the freedom of Barnabas, Titus and the Galatians themselves. In Galatians 2:1-5, Paul

rehearses the time when he took Barnabas and Titus with him to Jerusalem. While there, Paul, James, Peter, and John agreed that Titus—an uncircumcised Gentile/Church planter from Crete—did not need to be circumcised (v. 3).

Yet, there was a group of false brothers who disagreed and were seeking to force circumcision on Titus (i.e., Gentile Christians, cf. Acts 15:1). Paul says these false brothers secretly slipped in to spy out the freedom (ἐλευθερίαν) they enjoyed in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring them into slavery (καταδουλώσουσιν, 2:4). Note carefully Paul’s response in 2:5, “to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.”

Paul was unyielding in his resistance to the demands of the false brothers that Titus be circumcised. Paul’s response is the only proper response to anyone who seeks to bring you back under the yoke of the law. The false brother’s demand added to the work of Christ for one’s justification. Paul recognized that submitting to their demand was to be loaded down with the yoke of the law (i.e., to live under the burdensome requirement of winning God’s acceptance by one’s own obedience). He would not tolerate the “yoke enslaving” demand of the false brothers for even “a moment” (πρὸς ὄραν).

Some hills are worth dying over and some are not. For example, we can give room to debate pre-trib, post-trib, mid-trib, pre-mill, post-mill and a-mill—or perhaps some just throw up their hands and confess pan-mill, i.e., it will all pan out in the end! However, here we see from Paul that Christian freedom is a hill to die on! John Calvin writes, “...certainly it is an invaluable blessing, in defence of which it is our duty to fight, even to death; since not only the highest temporal considerations, but our eternal interests also, animate us to the contest” (Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21, p. 146).

We must take the Apostle’s imperative seriously and NEVER surrender our freedom!

REFLECTION:

Since Christ has set us free from the crushing yoke of the law, our response/duty is to keep standing firm in this freedom and never again be loaded down with the notion that we have to earn our acceptance with God by our own obedience. Samuel Bolton writes, “You are redeemed, not by silver and gold, but by the blood of Christ...Our freedom is dearly bought, mercifully revealed, freely bestowed, and fully conveyed to us by the Spirit of Christ. We have many and great reasons therefore for maintaining it, and for keeping ourselves clear of the yoke of bondage” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 219).

To be sure, much of a legal spirit remains in believers even though they are no longer under the law (cf. Gal. 3:25). You and I are tempted daily to surrender our freedom instead of standing firm in it. We must not subject ourselves to the legalistic bondage of a “do this and live” covenantal relationship with God. As John Stott writes, “We must not lapse into the idea that we have to win our acceptance with God by our own obedience” (*Galatians*, p. 132). We are not to return to living under the slavery of law, whether it is

the Mosaic Covenant or any kind of legal system. In the case of the Galatians, the issue was circumcision (5:2-4). Circumcision represented salvation by good works in obedience to the law (cf. Act 15:1). When we come to 5:2-12, we will examine specific ways in which we also are guilty of a “circumcision-like faith.” For now, the question before us is: How do we stand firm in our freedom?

1. STAND FIRM IN YOUR FREEDOM BY REFUSING TO LOOK TO THE LAW FOR JUSTIFICATION.

We must realize that even as justified believers, much of a legal spirit remains in us. Samuel Bolton writes, “Proud nature would fain do something for the purchase of glory. God will have it to be of grace, and man would have it of debt. God will have it to be of gift, and man would have it of purchase. We have too much of this nature in us” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 220).

Nothing you do endears you to God. Yet how often do we seek to plead our own qualifications as if they were deserving of God’s acceptance and blessing? You will never stand before God on the basis of what you do- before or after conversion.

You can only stand before God clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ alone. Prior to your conversion, your relationship to God and His law was one of guilt. Everything you did added to your guilt. Apart from Christ, the law says you “ought” to obey but you can’t. Therefore, you are guilty/cursed.

Question 3 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks, “From where do you know your misery?” Here’s the answer, “From the law of God” (Rom. 3:20; 7:7). Question 10 then asks, “Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?” Answer, “Certainly not, but He is terribly displeased with our inborn as well as our actual sins, and will punish them in just judgment in time and eternity, as He has declared: ‘Cursed is everyone that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.’”

Since you are incapable of satisfying God’s justice/law by what you do—but actually daily increase your guilt—you must refuse to look any more to the law for justification. There is nothing else to add to the ground of your salvation (i.e., Christ and His work).

There is no such thing as performance-based Christianity. Our good works—before and after conversion—can never serve as the whole or even part of our righteousness before God. The reason is because our works must be perfect and entirely conformable to the entire demand of the law. The problem, however, is that even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 62). Therefore, God’s approval and blessing comes not by way of merit but solely of grace (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 63). Yet so often, writes Samuel Bolton, “We are too big in ourselves when we do well, and too little in Christ in our failings” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 219).

If your “successes” or “failures” are more real to you than Christ and His work, you have stopped standing firm. Samuel Bolton then exclaims, “O that we could learn to be nothing in ourselves in our strength, and to be all in Christ in our weakness” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 219)!

You must always look for a remedy outside of yourself. You must constantly look to Christ who has set you free. He alone is the founder and perfecter of your faith (Heb. 12:2).

2. STAND FIRM IN YOUR FREEDOM BY REFUSING TO FEAR THE LAW’S CONDEMNATION.

Through faith in Christ, the believer’s relationship to God and His law is characterized by grace not guilt! Through faith in Christ, the Christian life is characterized and covered by divine favor not divine judgment!

Jesus, as our Mediator and Redeemer, has been given to us for complete redemption and righteousness (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 18). Through His life of obedience, Jesus fulfilled your “ought.” Through His death on the cross, Jesus satisfied the law’s penalties, which condemned you. Christ has removed your “can’t” and therefore your guilt. Therefore, your duty is to stand firm in your freedom by living as one who can neither be condemned or justified by the law.

To all then who are weary and loaded down with the crushing demands of the law, Jesus says, “²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Service to Jesus is “easy” and “light.” Why? It is easy and light because there is no more condemnation when we sin! Christ by grace frees us to obey. However, as long as your conscience is loaded down with guilt for your failures, you will never gladly and willingly obey. To be truly motivated to obey you must be “surely persuaded that you are pleasing to God” (John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.13.15).

In discussing Christian freedom John Calvin asks, “...how, then, would unhappy souls gird themselves eagerly for a work for which they might expect to receive only a curse?” (*Institutes*, 3.19.5). You will never obey willingly out of a spirit of gratitude so long as you live in the fearful expectation of being cursed. You must first be given freedom from the curse of the law (cf. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.4).

Since Christ has set you free, you can live your life without fear of the law’s condemnation despite your continued failure. The *Heidelberg Catechism* beautifully captures this when it states, “...God, for the sake of Christ’s satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but graciously imputes to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may nevermore come into

condemnation” (Q. 56). In light of such Good News, you can now respond to the demands of God’s law with gratitude.

3. STAND FIRM IN YOUR FREEDOM BY LEARNING TO OBEY THE LAW AS A GUIDE OF GRATITUDE IN YOUR SANCTIFICATION.

As a justified believer, your driving motive for obedience is now one of gratitude. In religion, obedience is driven by a fear of God’s rejection, or to make me feel good about myself or for a selfish desire for reward or return of favors. In contrast, in the gospel, the believer obeys out of gratitude and joy, not to get things from God, but because he has received so much from God!

Samuel Bolton writes, “Walk in the duties of the law, but with a Gospel spirit. The law is to be acknowledged as a rule of sanctification, but it is to be rejected in respect of justification” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 220). Willing, joyful obedience is born out of the gospel and consists of a sheer delight in God and a desire to please Him, which is created by the Holy Spirit (“...I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Ezek. 36:27; see also Ps. 119:97).

This new obedience (evangelical obedience) is all an act of grace born out of faith (cf. Heb. 11 “by faith”). It is not the forced obedience of a slave yielded from an unbelieving heart. Neil Williams writes, “...the Christian life is not solely a commandment-oriented way of life, where people are just told what to do, and then do it...The life of faith is a life of effort, but it is a certain type of effort, believing and unbelieving” (*The Theology of Sonship*, p. 12).

The law no longer threatens the justified believer with, “Do or else.” Rather, to the justified believer the law says, “Be who you are!” As we close, consider carefully the following words of Samuel Bolton,

“It is a hard lesson to live above the law, and yet to walk according to the law. But this is the lesson a Christian has to learn, to walk in the law in respect of duty, but to live above it in respect of comfort, neither expecting favour from the law in respect of his obedience nor fearing harsh treatment from the law in respect of his failings. Let the law come in to remind you of sin if you fall into sin, but you are not to suffer it to arrest you and drag you into the court to be tried and judged for your sins. This would be to make void Christ and grace. Indeed Christians too much live as though they were to expect life by works, and not by grace...In a word, let us learn to walk in the law as a rule of sanctification, and yet to live upon Christ and the promises in respect of justification” (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, pp. 219-220).

Stand firm in your Christian freedom by always living in the self-conscious reality that it was for freedom that Christ set you free!

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