



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 5: 1-12

Summer 2021

"Stand Free or Fall"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are in Galatians chapter 5 this morning; and in the providence of God, on the Fourth of July, on Independence Day when we celebrate our national freedom, we are dealing with our Christian freedom in this text. So not really intended to be an Independence Day sermon, but it does fit.

So, it's a lengthy passage. I'm going to read verses 1 through 12, Galatians 5,

5 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. **3** And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. **4** You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. **5** For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. **6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

7 You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? **8** This persuasion *did* not *come* from Him who calls you. **9** A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*. **10** I 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. **11** But 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.

Galatians 5: 1-12

May the LORD bless the reading of His Word and bless our time of studying in it together.

(Message) England's King John lived in the shadow of his big brother, King Richard. Richard led the Third Crusade and fought Saladin in the Holy Land, while John fought Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest. Richard is known as The Lionheart, The King of Legend. But John did something far more significant than his big brother. In the year 1215 he signed the Magna Carta. It guaranteed rights to England's citizens, and has been called the cornerstone of English liberty.

The Book of Galatians has been called the 'Magna Carta of Spiritual Emancipation'—and with justification, because Paul began chapter 5, "It was for freedom that Christ has set us free." It is freedom greater than anything in the Magna Carta or America's Bill of Rights. It is spiritual freedom—eternal and blood bought.

Chapter 5 begins a new section, the book's third and final section. Paul defended his apostleship in chapters 1 and 2; he defended the Gospel in chapters 3 and 4; and now in chapters 5 and 6 he defends the Christian life. It is a life of liberty, lived through the power and in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 17, 'Where the Spirit of the LORD is, there the heart is free.' In the Book of Galatians Paul's emphasis is on freedom: mainly freedom from the Law of Moses; freedom from the false ideas that the Law is a way of salvation; freedom from the Law's condemnation; and from the Law as a rule of life. Believers in Christ are no longer under the Law of Moses.

Now of course, to say we're free from the Law doesn't mean that we're free to sin. Paul answers that in various places. He answers that in Romans chapter 6, verse 2, 'Shall we sin that grace might increase? May it never be!' He said, "God forbid." And it doesn't mean that the Law is of no use to us. The Law is a revelation of God's holiness. It is Scripture and it still teaches us about God's character. We study it and we learn from it. But the Law of Moses is not the rule of the Christian life. It reveals God's righteousness and our unrighteousness, but it doesn't give obedience: the Holy Spirit gives that. —And that is real freedom.

Calvin called that, "an inestimable blessing for which we should fight, even to the death." Well, Paul was ready to do that. Galatians is, as we have pointed out on more than one occasion, 'A fighting epistle'. And Paul continues the fight for freedom at the beginning of chapter 5 by declaring the fact of our freedom—and then telling the Galatians to stand firmly in it. He begins with a declaration of our independence, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free." (vs1). And again, freedom, here, is freedom from the Law and the great emphasis of this Book of Galatians.

According to Romans chapter 8, verse 4, 'all the requirements of the Law were fulfilled in Christ, in His life and in His death, so all who believe in Him, who have joined themselves to Him and are in Him have fulfilled the Law through Christ, and are no longer under Law.' "Therefore," Paul said, since Christ has set us free, "keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." (vs1). 'Don't lapse into a life of bondage', he's saying. That's what life under the Law is. It's bondage. It is a yoke. The apostles stated that. Peter called it that very thing in Acts chapter 15, in verse 10, "a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear."

We should think of an ox, bowed down under a heavy yoke. —And then the yoke is broken off the ox's neck and the ox is able to stand up erect again, and walk about freely. Well, Christ has done that for us. He has broken the yoke of the Law from off our necks with its impossible demands and its dreadful condemnation for our failure to keep those demands, for our disobedience. And so they, and we, must not fall back under that yoke again.

The Galatians, however, were doing just that—in the process of doing that very thing. They had become enamored of the Law and ready to give up their freedom. So Paul warns them of this with the full force of his apostolic authority. And for the first time mentions, by name, the very issue that was threatening this great danger. It's something we've talked about numerous times through our study, but here in the Book of Galatians, for the first time, Paul states it—and that is *circumcision*. "Behold," he says, (meaning, 'Mark my words, this is serious!'), "I, Paul", (meaning, 'I, the apostle Paul'), "say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you." (vs2).

Now we might wonder why it is so crucial an issue that Paul would write a letter and give such dire warnings about this—about circumcision. After all, it is a simple surgical operation, performed only once.

40 years ago, when I was living in Jerusalem, we were invited to what's called a *bris*, or a *brit milah*, 'the covenant'. Some neighbors of ours, an Israeli couple, had just had their first child, a son, and he was going to be circumcised on the eighth day. So we were invited to come and my friend invited me to get a front row seat, as it were, to stand right around the rabbi. And the little boy was handed to him, all bundled up. And so I was interested in this whole process. And he said a few words in Hebrew. He took out his surgical instruments and before you know it: the child was about to cry; they stanching the blood; and it was over. In fact, I think I missed it, it was so quick. *[Laughter]*

And so something so basic, and so brief, and that happens once, you might wonder why did Paul consider it so dangerous that if they received it, Christ would be of no benefit to them? And the reason is, if the Galatians submitted to circumcision as a legal obligation, they would be acknowledging that Law keeping was necessary for obtaining righteous standing with God. We can only be accepted by God if we keep the Law—and that would nullify the grace of God; and it would make the atonement of the cross, it would make the sacrifice of Christ, completely unnecessary and ineffectual.

Now circumcision itself is really not the issue. It was a matter of indifference. Paul was circumcised. He circumcised Timothy before taking him on the second missionary journey. The issue here is the importance that a person places upon

circumcision, or ceremonies, or works of any kind, for that matter. It is the theology of circumcision and salvation by works that is the real issue. It is the problem of confusing grace and law; of mixing faith, with works. There is no middle ground. We cannot have it both ways.

That's clear for obvious reasons, as Paul explained it back in chapter 2, verse 21—where he made the point that if we can save ourselves by 'law keeping', then we don't need a Savior and God would not have sent His Son to die such a painful and shameful death if we could save ourselves.

The fact that He did send His Son is the clear, demonstrable evidence that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves by Law keeping or any other means. We can be saved only by the person and work of Jesus Christ. And that's true even when it is a salvation that is only partially our work and the rest Christ, when it is salvation by faith, plus circumcision, or baptism for that matter. Well that make Christ only half a Savior. As Calvin said, "Whoever wants to have a half-Christ, loses the whole." That's true. "Christ will be of no benefit" to such people, Paul says. It is all of Christ—or nothing.

Now the Galatians had not yet taken that fatal step, and I think it's important to note. Paul says, "If you receive circumcision," indicating that they'd not yet made this complete decision, this complete commitment—there was still hope. And Paul was seeking to rescue them from that very wrong decision.

So in verse 3 he repeats the warning and he reinforces it, "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law." This is the second consequence or danger. Choosing circumcision is choosing legalism which involves taking on the burden of the whole Law. Earlier, Paul quoted Deuteronomy 27, verse 26, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide in all things written in the book of the law to perform them.'

Now it's doubtful that the legalizers, the Judaizers, who'd come to Galatia had told the Galatians all of this—that they would be putting themselves under the complete Law. They were going to draw these people into the error gradually.

But Paul tells them that if salvation is by works, then one work is not enough. Circumcision alone won't do. A person can't pick and choose what he or she will follow in the Law. The Law is a whole. We sometimes speak of it in terms of three parts to the Law; the moral, the civil, the ceremonial. And we can look at it in that way, and we can systematize it in that way, but the Law is not three parts. The Law is a whole. And to take hold of a part of it is to take hold of all of it. So the whole legal system must be obeyed and kept perfectly, which, of course, is impossible. In fact, that's the point of the Law.

But people don't realize that. They assume that God judges us the same way that we judge ourselves, or with the same relative kind of standard that we judge one another by: 'Now God knows that nobody's perfect, and so He's lenient. He not only takes into account our successes at obedience but also our effort; even when we fail at being good.'

But God says, 'No, no. If you're going to be saved by law keeping, circumcision alone is not enough. The whole Law must be kept, all 613 rules, and kept perfectly in both thought and deed.' That should have concerned the Galatians. But if it didn't, then the third consequence would have. Paul said, in verse 4, "You have been severed from Christ." If you engage in circumcision, if you adopt that, you have been severed from Christ, you are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Back in chapter 3, verse 10, Paul said that those who seek justification by the Law bring down on themselves the Law's curse, not God's blessing. Here he's saying that pursuing righteousness by means of the Law separates a person from Christ and the benefits of His sacrifice—the benefits of the atonement. Then he adds the ominous words, "...you have fallen from grace." (vs4). But, what does that mean when Paul says, "fallen from grace"?

It's a phrase that has led to a lot of confusion. Many have interpreted those words to mean 'fallen from salvation', as if a person can be saved, actually possess eternal life, and then lose it and be lost forever. Well that could hardly be eternal life. If it can be lost it's not really eternal, it's temporal. Nevertheless, that is what many people believe can happen, and they think "fallen from grace" means just that.

But it's very important to pay attention, both to the words and the context. Paul doesn't say, 'You have fallen from salvation'. He says, "fallen from grace". There is a difference. In fact, there is a sense in which, 'to sin is to fall into grace'. The Bible has examples of saints guilty of gross sin: murder, adultery, even denying the LORD. —Moses, David, Peter are examples.

Those people were not cast off by God. Just the opposite. Grace rescued them. It saves the lost sinner, and it disciplines and restores the sinning saint. Grace is unconditional. It preserves the saint in salvation so that that salvation can never be lost. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or better the 'perseverance of the Savior with the saints' is found throughout the Bible. Romans 8 verse 38 and 39 is very clear on that. 'Nothing', Paul says, (and he gives many examples of the extremes that he could cite), 'Nothing,' though, 'can separate us from the love of God.'

But Paul, who wrote that, does say that a person can fall from grace. What does he mean? Well, he means that a person can fall away from the principle of grace, as the method of salvation. Grace is not, itself, salvation. It is the means of the way to salvation. So a person falls from grace by falling into legalism, by adopting the way of 'works' for salvation, and abandoning the way of grace.

This is the danger that Paul warns about all through the Book of Galatians—Apostasy. "...deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ", as he put it, by the way of grace, "...for a different gospel." That's chapter 1, verse 6. So from the very beginning, this is his warning. A true believer cannot finally do that. And the Galatians had not done it. Paul believed they were true believers and that they would respond to his warnings. A child of God responds to the warnings of God. And responds to the warnings of God's people as they give them. So he had not given up on the Galatians.

In these verses, verses 2 through 4, he was giving them something of a wakeup call to renounce legalism—to back away from what they were considering. Legalism is salvation by works. There's no such thing. And so he's warning them before they took that final step.

He then gives the essence of the Gospel in verse 5 in order to support all that he has said. It is really the last full statement of the principle of justification by faith in this letter. He writes, "For we," that is, we Christians, "through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness." In other words, we are waiting, by faith, for the future glory when full righteousness will be realized, when we're saved not only from the guilt of sin but also from the presence of sin. We will be righteous, pure. And that's what we're looking forward to. That's the glory to come. And so he's speaking of that, realizing this. And that's our hope that we have. We're waiting for that, waiting for that day when we will be perfect and not weighed down by sin and failure ever again.

But the point we want to notice is, we wait for it. We don't work for it. It's not a matter of human effort; of striving to earn God's favor by our good deeds. Glorification, which is what he's speaking of here, is a gift—just like justification is. And the gift of it is indicated by the fact that our faith is through the Holy Spirit. We don't generate our own faith and faithfulness. It is supernaturally given. It's true we exercise faith, and we persevere in that faith. We are conscious of it and we exercise our will in it—but only by the sovereign grace of God. It is through the Holy Spirit.

Now the Law can't produce that; it can't do that; 'it works death', as Paul says elsewhere. The Spirit gives life. He gives faith and joins us to Christ, and keeps us alive and waiting for the glorious promise of the future. So our hope has nothing to do with law keeping, with circumcision, or ceremonies of any kind—or with uncircumcision for that matter, that's what Paul says in verse 6. So you can't boast in your circumcision and you can't boast in your lack of circumcision. What is important, what is essential, is faith—and not just faith, but faith working through love—faith that is alive and bears the fruit of love.

When Paul rejects the Law as the basis of our justification and salvation, he was not denouncing godly, moral conduct. He was not suggesting that saving faith is belief, and has nothing to do with works, or obedience. Not at all. For Paul, for all of the apostles, true faith—saving faith is a faith that is alive. It is a faith that works.

We're not saved by works—but we are saved through a faith that does work. And it can't be otherwise, since Christ is the Savior, who Himself works and loves. His work of redemption for His people is the greatest act of love that has ever been done or offered. And it evokes love in us as we consider it. It's one of the reasons we take the LORD's Supper every week as we reflect upon who He is and what He's done—the great sacrifice He made; the great act of love that He performed on our behalf—we who did not deserve it, did not earn it; it is all unconditional. That creates within us a love for Him—and a love for others.

In fact, Paul speaks of that in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, in verse 14, of how the love of God constrains him, controls him to love the LORD, and to love one another with a self-denying love. Well, it cannot be otherwise since by faith we are joined to Him. We are placed in Him, and we partake and participate in His life. Our Savior is a living Savior. He is alive. And being joined to Him, we enjoy His life. We experience His life and His love through the Holy Spirit, and it transforms us. It changes us.

So salvation is by faith. But genuine faith expresses itself in love—which is the expression of Christian freedom. We act in obedience because we want to—not because we have to. Now don't misunderstand me. Obedience is not an option for the Christian. We must live an obedient life to the LORD. But what the grace of God does for us, as we understand it, and what the Spirit of God does as He works within us, is create within us a desire to do that, so that we comply, with joy, out of gratitude. We do it because we want to, not because we have to. That's the highest motive in being obedient and serving the LORD.

Now that anticipates, everything I've just said, the subject of the rest of the letter: the ethical, moral section of the book. The Christian life is a life of Grace. It is lived in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who produces faith working in love. The Law does not work. The Law reflects our condition—like a mirror does. But a mirror doesn't change our condition and the Law can't change anything. It can simply demonstrate what we are.

No, the LORD does the work. He produces both the power and the motivation to live obediently. And Paul will develop all of that in these last chapters. But he's not ready to go there yet. He first expresses his concern and his hope for the Galatians and his condemnation for the Judaizers.

In verse 7 he compares the Galatians' past progress with their present confusion. "You were running well;" he says, "who hindered you from obeying the truth?"

Paul, as you know as you read through the New Testament, was fond of athletic metaphors. In his writings he speaks of running and wrestling and boxing to bring out the active, and even to some extent, the combative, (in a good sense), nature of the Christian life. It's about going to war. It's about fighting for the truth. It's about fighting against that which is evil and wrong. It's a life of discipline. It's a life of concentration and adherence to the rules.

And early on, the Galatians showed all of that. They were like runners who began the race well. They had not only believed the Gospel, but they had begun living the Gospel—living correctly; living well.

Then someone 'cut into their lane and forced them off the course'. Now, I can imagine that Paul saw something like that—saw a race where that happened. I've seen that. Jim Ryan was a great distance runner. He had a great career at the University of Kansas, and was expected to win gold in the 1500 meters in the Olympics in Mexico City. But he got silver instead. A great disappointment for him, and for his fans. And so he was running for gold in the next Olympics—in the 1972 Olympics in Munich. He was running well in the qualifying heat when he was tripped and fell—and it was a foul against him! But, nevertheless, it disqualified him from the competition. I saw it on television. It was a big disappointment.

Paul saw something like that—or he had, at least, that in mind in this picture that he gives of the Galatians, running well when an interloper tripped them up. Now it didn't happen violently, as it might and does in a footrace—but subtly, persuasively. That's how Paul describes this new influence in verse 8. He calls it a "persuasion". But it wasn't a "persuasion" from God. It wasn't, "from Him who calls you", Paul said. It was

false, but very clever. It seemed biblical. That's why it could so effectively infiltrate these congregations in Galatia.

And to make his point, he quotes a proverb in verse 9. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*." In other words, error spreads—and even a little error spreads. It grows and effects everything insidiously, imperceptibly, until it completely takes over, just like yeast does in dough. A little yeast does that—and a little error does that. So really there's no such thing as just a little error. A small amount can do great damage, just as a spark can set off a forest fire.

So the church, and Christians personally, must be on guard constantly for error in all of its forms. It's often very persuasive and begins small. But the consequences can be catastrophic.

Benjamin Franklin put the importance of small things in this way, "For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. And for want of a battle the kingdom was lost. All this for want of a horseshoe nail." Well, circumcision seemed like a small thing, like a horseshoe nail, and seemed persuasive. It's biblical—but wrongly taught, it is deadly. It brings a person under obligation to the whole Law, and it severs the person who adopts it from Christ.

Paul didn't believe error would triumph in the church, or over the Galatians, and in verse 10, he states his confidence in them. He believed they would come to their senses, and the false teachers would come to nothing—and that they would suffer the penalty of what they had done. They would suffer judgment. "I 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."

That's an expression of confidence in some weak people. But Paul's confidence was not really in them, but in the LORD. He believed they were genuine. He believed they were children of God. He knew that the LORD was in them, and working for them, and so he has confidence in the LORD. "I have confidence in you in the LORD." So he knows the LORD's faithful—even when we're not. And we aren't. We're all like sheep that go astray. He's the good shepherd who goes after His lost sheep and finds them—always finds

them. Those who are His will be found and brought back. He does that through the Holy Spirit—to persuade and restore us. And often, very often, the Spirit uses us to do that.

Later in chapter 6, in verse 1, Paul will say, "...you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." And Paul was confident that the LORD would work through him and his exhortations here, to restore the Galatians to the truth because he was confident that they were true believers.

So in verse 11, he applies persuasion to answer the false charges made against him by the Judaizers. They tried to discredit his message, his Gospel, and all that he was doing—by discrediting him, saying, 'He was a hypocrite.' And so Paul answers that. They accused Paul of preaching circumcision when it suited him. They told them, "He really preaches this gospel that we're preaching to you. But when he's among the Gentiles he doesn't do it. He doesn't want to discourage them, and so he makes the gospel easier by not talking about circumcision—makes it easier to accept.'

Well, this charge was false, as Paul plainly shows. He asks, "If I still preach circumcision," (as these false teachers claimed he did), *then* "why" he asks, "am I still persecuted?" (vs11). He suffered a lot for proclaiming a 'Law free' Gospel. If he really did preach circumcision, then he would have got along with these Judaizers and avoided all the trouble that he was facing from their attacks upon him. "Then," he says, "the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished." (vs11b). He would have nothing to fear from men if he preached the Law, if he preached circumcision—then he would be at peace with the world.

The nature of the Gospel that he preached, the nature of the apostolic Gospel is, it is without Law, it is all about grace. And what is really the 'scandal of the cross' is just that: That it's not about us; it's not about our merit; it's not about what we can do to obtain and achieve. And so if Paul were to diminish that, then he'd be free—he would be free of the persecution and the hostility that he faced. There'd be no opposition.

But that's not the Gospel that he preached. —And that's not the Gospel of Scripture, of the apostles, because ... the Gospel that he preached of grace alone

deprives men of any kind of merit—any ground for boasting. That is, as I said, ‘the scandal of the cross.’ And that alone is what Paul preached. That's why he says he was persecuted. The opposition against him disproves everything that they were saying about him. No, he didn't have two gospels that he preached. He preached the Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Paul has a final word for his persecutors who were troubling the Galatians with their man pleasing, works oriented, false gospel. He writes in verse 12, "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves." That word *mutilate* means something like ‘emasculate’. Paul was saying, in effect, that since these Judaizers were so enamored of circumcision that they would go all the way and make eunuchs of themselves. It's rough language; it's a little disturbing as you think about it. It puts circumcision, though, in its right place and in perspective. Now that the Law is ended, and the Old Covenant finished, circumcision is of no more value than being neutered. And I think in saying that he's also suggesting, ‘I wish these people would put themselves in a position where they can't reproduce heretics like themselves—put them out of the picture all together.’

Rituals, ceremonies, works of any kind, add nothing to salvation. But if any of them are considering as a necessary act to complete the work of Christ, considering this kind of an act, this ceremony, any work, then they cut people off from Him and His grace. The only way to be saved, and the only way to advance in salvation in holiness and obedience and love is through grace, in Christ, and through the Spirit.

And so we must avoid the legalism, we must look to Christ. Salvation is only through Him. In that truth we must stand, or we will fall.

Have you believed in Him? If not, look to Christ who died for sinners. Believe in Him and be saved. May God help you to do that. Look to Christ. And then, by His grace, live free by His grace.

Father, we do thank You for Your grace and mercy and the great sacrifice that was made by Your Son. And we thank You for Him, and for what He's done for us, and the fact that it's final—He said, "It's finished." There's nothing more we need to do but receive the gift of salvation that He obtained for all who believe.

Father, may we never drift away from that great truth—that we never adopt a principle of works that must be added to what He did in order to gain Your acceptance—That is a false gospel. You've saved us with the truth, and we pray that we would live a life that is steadfast in that truth and that it would be reflected in our daily conduct.

So LORD, we thank You for Your grace, and pray that You would bless us richly with it, and bless our time that follows, Father.

And now the LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

(End of Audio)