

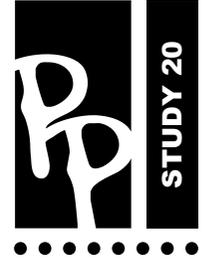
INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 3



A new section of the epistle begins in chapter 5. Chapters 1-4 have been full of arguments in which Paul has defended his gospel as God-given, and he has attacked the message of those who wanted believers to keep the law of Moses as a means of salvation. In the first part of chapter 5 (verses 1-12) Paul concludes this defence with an appeal to the Galatian believers concerning their freedom and how they had been misled.

From verse 13 in chapter 5 and in chapter 6 Paul begins to instruct the Galatian believers as to how a person who has been changed by God's grace is altered in their behaviour and attitude. The Judaisers were teaching that the law of Moses was the key to being made right with God. They were arguing that you had to become a Jew by taking on all the rites and ritual of the Jewish religion. Obedience to the law of Moses would make a person conform to a set of rules and shape their behaviour. If doing this pleased God then the resulting lifestyle must be regarded as being good. Paul, having defended the gospel of grace and refuted obedience to the law, now shows his readers that the gospel of grace will produce a pattern of behaviour. The change in the Galatian believers came about by the work of the Spirit, so Paul exhorts them to live in the Spirit (see verses 5 and 16). This is a different way of life from formal law-keeping.

TRUE FREEDOM



Galatians 5:1-5

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Notes
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Two suggestions of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The Pharisees and Sadducees
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Paul has been setting out his case, layer upon layer, for the Galatian believers to recognise and accept God's grace as being at the centre of their lives and not human good deeds. The reason is quite simple. It is impossible to please God with our deeds; the attempt just alienates us from him. Those who had come amongst the Galatians were not trying to add to or amend the gospel of grace, they were denying it! They were stressing the outward, conforming and obeying a set of rules. True Christianity is spiritual and the only way a person can possibly please God is by his Holy Spirit indwelling and leading that person's life. Such a person has been set free and is no longer imprisoned by the slavery of obeying laws and ritual. This true freedom can only be gained in one way, through believing in Jesus Christ and the gracious sacrifice of his life on the cross.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

There is a double use of the same root word “free” which gives great emphasis to the statement. A prisoner may be freed from prison but does not necessarily enjoy freedom as he goes back to his community. He may have to face up to being looked upon as an ex-criminal. He may not be able to return to his community for fear of his life. Being freed from a particular condition does not mean we are fully free. So here is a truth that is being stated by the apostle as vigorously as he can state it. “We’re free!” By “freedom” Paul means one special freedom – he means the freedom from God’s wrath which Christ obtained by his life and death for his people. By giving that freedom to believers, Christ has made them free indeed! Compare John 8:34-36. See the *fulness of this freedom explained in suggestions for preaching No 1, (i) – (vii)*.

Stand firm, then,

We are to stand firm in this freedom that Christ has given to us. This means we are to enjoy and use this freedom. No longer does sin dominate our lives. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.” He continues in the next verse, “. . . offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life” (Rom. 6:12-13). Paul often urged his readers to remain firm (1 Co. 16:13; Phil. 1:27, 4:1 1 Thess. 3:8). It was hard to be a Christian in those days; it was easier to give up. Paul used a form of this verb which means “Keep on standing firm”. In addition to our individual lives this call to stand firm is to be applied to defending the way this freedom is given by Christ. This is the whole point of the letter to the Galatians. The freedom we have in Christ is under constant attack. Legalism¹, nominalism² and false doctrine are all ways that Satan uses to bring about sin and unbelief. This then is a battle cry; watch out, stand firm, be brave, do not give in.

¹ Legalism describes a situation where the principles set out in God’s Word are replaced by a set of rules and regulations. God’s favour is then sought by keeping to the rules. For example, insisting on a particular dress code for the congregation is a form of legalism. The Bible is not specific on how we are to dress, but it does warn us of the weaker and stronger brother, immorality and the weakness of the flesh. There is an instruction for women to be modest in appearance so as not to draw attention to themselves (1 Tim. 2:9). Another example would be insisting on following a way of doing things as if it were all a ritual. This could be the way we come to worship and conduct our meetings, or in the way we behave individually. Often we can confuse cultural practice with biblical principles, when cultural practice takes over and becomes a substitute. The set of rules that the Pharisees had introduced was legalism. (For Pharisees see Focus Point at the end of this study.) For *nominalism* see footnote on next page.

and do not let yourselves be burdened again

In some Bible versions the phrase “do not be entangled again” is used. Pagan religions had a complicated system of rules and regulations. Judaism had a similar system of compulsory behaviour. Both pagans and Jews were like people caught in a net that restricted their freedom. Paul says to the Galatians: “Don’t leave one net (paganism) simply to be caught **again** in another (Judaism).” Compare 4:9.

by a yoke of slavery.

A yoke was a beam of wood that was put across the neck of two oxen to keep them together as they pulled a heavy load. The idea is that of imprisonment, being enslaved under a heavy load. The animals are not free to roam about, but are under a taskmaster. The meaning here is enslavement to the law and condemnation to endless striving in a futile search for righteousness.³ Compare Acts 15:10. The many Old Testament ceremonies became a tiresome burden to the Jews and to make matters worse they had added many more of their own rules and regulations. This fact explains Jesus’ words (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus said that belief in him and receiving his salvation was a delightfully restful yoke compared with the unbearable yoke of Moses.

Verse 2

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you

Some of the strongest statements of the whole letter will now follow. Paul makes it clear that these are carefully thought-out words, with his full apostolic authority behind them. (He does the same on several occasions. Compare 2 Corinthians 10:1; Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; Philemon 19.)

that if you let yourselves be circumcised,

Perhaps they had not yet submitted to this rite. But they had begun to observe special Jewish festivals (4:10). Paul feared they might also

Footnote 2 from page 3

² Nominalism is believing in name only and not the idea or object. For example, a Christian believing couple raise their children in the Christian faith. The children grow up following the practices of their parents. They do not do this out of conviction but because they have always done things this way from earliest childhood. When they become adults and if they themselves do not come to a personal faith and trust in Christ, but continue in the Christian lifestyle, they will be nominal Christians, that is in name only. This is a problem that is experienced in second and subsequent generations of Christian communities. What is needed is for nominal Christians to come to true repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; then they will be genuine Christians.

³ Edgar Andrews, *Free in Christ* (Evangelical Press).

submit to this Jewish ceremony. The act of circumcision seems to be a tiny thing, but it was also a theological symbol with great significance. It stood for a way of salvation by human effort.

Christ will be of no value to you at all.

Whoever tries to go the way of salvation by human effort can have no benefit from Christ. Such a person actually insults Christ, which is even worse! God has said, “The only salvation is by Christ.” What an arrogant insult it is for someone to reply to God, “No, I will save myself.” How insolent to reject God’s great gift of his Son, and lose the spiritual benefits Christ gives, for example to be without the Holy Spirit’s presence and gifts.

Verse 3

Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised

It is vital for the Galatians to grasp the difference between gaining salvation through faith in Christ and going through a physical ritual. Circumcision is the false way; it is a delusion. Paul is saying, “I protest against this way!” Why is Paul protesting so strongly against circumcision? He continues.

that he is required to obey the whole law.

Paul explains again why circumcision done for religious reasons is utterly wrong for those believers. Circumcision was the badge, the sign, of a covenant agreement between God and Israel. Whoever puts themselves under the religion of that sign must be expected therefore to live by all the regulations of that covenant, and cannot live as a person freed from that old covenant by Christ (5:1).

The Greek words translated “no value” (5:2) and “required” (5:3) sound very similar when spoken. Perhaps Paul is making a pun here, “Not only will Christ **not** help you . . . you will be **helplessly** caught by the whole law.”

Verse 4

You who are trying to be justified by law

The Galatians were being persuaded that submitting to the law (being circumcised) was consistent with their faith in Christ. “Not so,” Paul thunders, because they are trying to be justified through the physical ritual. In other words they think God will accept them as being righteous because they have obeyed the law of Moses through circumcision.

have been alienated from Christ;

This means “you are severed from Christ”. When the knife cut their flesh in circumcision it would signify they were also cut off from Christ as Saviour. The verb translated “become of no effect”, or “severed”, is

also used in Romans 7:2 and 6 (“released”, “delivered”) where it relates to “a marriage completely ended by death”. Religious circumcision would divorce them from Christ.

you have fallen away from grace.

To fall from grace is the opposite of Romans 5:1,2 (by faith in Christ we have access into God’s grace). To reject Christ by seeking to save ourselves is to expel ourselves from God’s grace. Whoever seeks salvation by their own effort not only loses the benefits Christ gives (5:3) but also loses him (5:4). Does this mean that true believers can ultimately be lost? No, this verse does not contradict the doctrine of the final perseverance of believers (John 10:28). The doctrine of final perseverance means that no true believers will finally turn back to trying to save themselves and so will never come under the solemn words of these verses 3 and 4. But these words are a warning, which can stop a believer from ever wanting to reject Christ. (Believers are constantly under attack and whilst they are safe in God’s hands, they still experience doubts and fears due to their sinful nature - see Study 22, pages 4-5.)

Verse 5

But by faith

Faith is the key. Faith is received from the Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13) as a gift from God (Eph. 2:8) and those who receive it use it to trust in Christ for salvation.

we eagerly await

Paul says that **true** Christian believers (those who have received the gift of faith) confidently wait to receive the full benefits of salvation when Jesus comes again. This is so different from those who trust in their own efforts to please God, because they actually cut themselves off from Christ and the blessings he gives (5:4), The Greek word for “wait” literally means “to eagerly expect”. Compare Philippians 3:20,21.

through the Spirit

The Holy Spirit who gives believers spiritual life in the first place (4:29) causes believers to have the hope of salvation.⁴

⁴ The way that the Bible describes salvation in different time periods can at first seem a bit confusing. For the believer his salvation is complete, it is being worked out and it is still hoped for. All three are true and we have to understand it that way. When Jesus died on the cross his work of atonement was finished. All the sins of his people (past, present and future) were punished. When a person through faith first believes in Christ they are saved. They now experience being a child of God, addressing him as Abba, Father. They have that assurance of being saved. Yet whilst upon this earth the believer still has a sinful nature and daily needs to confess his sins and be forgiven. (Jesus told Peter that a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet – John 13:10.) Their salvation will only be fully complete at the day of resurrection (or judgement day) when Jesus returns.

the righteousness for which we hope.

The hope of this eagerly awaited righteousness is produced in believers by the faith they receive from the Spirit. By the “hope of righteousness” Paul means the hope of a favourable verdict in the last judgement. See Romans 2:5-16. The believer receives all the merits of Christ and will be therefore publicly declared “not guilty” – i.e. righteous – in the last judgement.

To try to earn God’s favour
by law-keeping

To have Christ for our
Saviour

results in

brings us

- Death (3:10) i.e. because no one keeps the law perfectly.
- Fear and wretchedness (Heb. 2:15).
- Slavery (3:23; 4:8, 24, 25).

- Life (Rom. 8:10).
- Hope and assurance (5:5).
- Freedom (5:1).

Verse 6

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.

Circumcision, along with other God-ordained ceremonies, was temporary until the coming of Jesus. They gave people hope in this transient period, for without these visual symbols they would have been lost. Whilst these symbols could not save the people, they could make them appreciate the grace of God. The coming of Jesus signified that the time had fully come and the temporary arrangements were replaced with permanent things. Therefore the permanent things are to be found in Christ Jesus and not the temporary ones. Being circumcised will not bring salvation and being uncircumcised will not make salvation impossible. Instead, we need to concentrate on things that are lasting and in Christ we find the answer.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

If a person has true faith in Christ, then loving, Christlike acts will follow. See James 2:26; 1 Peter 1:22. The evidence that people are true Christian believers is the loving lifestyle which their faith inspires them to practise. Neither the act of circumcision, nor any other ceremony, can produce this kind of lifestyle. This love does not come naturally to sinful and corrupted human nature. It stems from the Holy Spirit changing the person and giving him or her the faith to believe. This

faith enables the person to understand and experience the love of God through his Son, Jesus. It is that type of love that now shows itself in the person who has been saved by faith.

 **Notes**

1. Paul has now mentioned the three graces which together comprise the essence of true spiritual experience – faith, verses 5,6; hope, verse 5; love, verse 6. See also Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8.
2. In these verses Paul does not put baptism as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament circumcision ceremony. It is not biblically correct to say we must now baptise the babies of Christians because the Old Testament Jews circumcised their babies. According to Paul the New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament sign of circumcision (to show a person to be one of God’s people) is the possession of spiritual faith, hope and love. That is one reason why Baptists baptise only **believers** who by **their faith** show that they are God’s **New Testament** people.

 **Summary**

Paul has been setting out his case of “grace” against “works” in the matter of man’s salvation. Grace is God’s acting in love, works is man’s trying through his own actions. In the first four chapters Paul has been approaching his subject from different positions. He has had to defend his own apostolic rôle, how he was taught the gospel of grace he had brought to the Galatian believers, and the wrong view that the Judaisers had of the law of Moses and Jewish religion. When Paul originally wrote his letters it was without the division of chapters, that being added years after Paul’s life. The first part of chapter five can be looked upon as a continuation of the previous chapter. Paul is bringing his argument to a close before moving on to practical application. To emphasise his case he contrasts the freedom we have in Christ with the bondage (yoke) of the law.

Continued on page 9

Summary continued from page 8

Having gained this freedom we are to stand firm in it. Circumcision, the ritual that the Judaisers were advocating, belonged to the Old Testament and has been replaced by faith. This faith comes through the Holy Spirit's making known to the person the truth about Jesus, that the person's sins were punished when Jesus died on the cross. The Spirit then indwells the believer, bringing righteousness, hope, assurance, love and fruitfulness of life. This can only come about through grace and not by works.

Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses

1. **Believers are free!** (Gal. 5:1.)

Introduction

Freedom is regarded as being a basic human right. Slavery is acknowledged worldwide as wrong. Everyone wants freedom. Not everyone understands what it is. Freedom does not mean removal of all limitations – that is chaos. True freedom is not the opportunity to do what you like, but is the opportunity to do what you ought. A thing is free when it can happily fulfil the purpose for which it is made. Christian freedom is not freedom to sin but freedom from sin.

The spiritual freedom Christ gives to believers includes:

- i. Freedom from the old covenant which required all the law of Moses to be kept. Christ has fulfilled it for us. See Book 2, page 153 and the note on 4:10.
- ii. Freedom from the penalties that the old covenant required of guilty law-breakers. Christ has paid the penalties and removed the guilt.
- iii. Freedom from having to obey our old sinful nature. Christ by the Spirit has given us a new nature.
- iv. Freedom from having to obey Satan's suggestions. Christ has defeated him and broken his power over believers.
- v. Freedom from any false teaching or wrong public opinion. The teaching of Christ enables us to test all other teachings and reject what does not agree with his truth.

- vi. Freedom from evil and dictatorial human authorities. Christ has taught us to obey God rather than man when human authorities require unjust behaviour of us.
- vii. Freedom from fear of death and from the bondage of decay. Christ's resurrection signals the resurrection of all believers and the coming of a new and incorruptible heaven and earth.

Conclusion (Gal. 5:13)

The popular idea of Christianity is that it is a religion that forbids so many things. Actually it is a religion that liberates the human spirit from so many things that control unbelievers.

2. **To add is to subtract!** (Gal. 5:2-4)

Introduction

Preachers are sometimes criticised for what they say. Paul was often attacked for his message. Not because he said bad things, nor because he said wrong things. But Paul was often criticised because he insisted that God gives salvation away freely to people who don't deserve it: i.e. salvation **by grace**.

People often like to think they **do** deserve salvation: i.e. they prefer salvation **by works**. Hence they proudly object to receiving grace: they prefer to think they can earn their favour in God's sight. Paul insists that to try to add human effort to God's gracious gift of salvation is to destroy the possibility of receiving grace! To add is to subtract!

- i. **Paul knew the truth of what he taught.** Saul the Pharisee tried hard to earn his salvation from God and failed. See Philippians 3:5-7. As soon as he had seen the great glory of Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9), Saul knew he could never attain such holiness whatever he did. Paul the Christian knew from experience that salvation must be received as a gift from God.
- ii. **God gives salvation freely because there is no better way for us to gain it** (Gal. 5:3).
If salvation had to be earned by what we do, we become hopeless slaves to obey rules and regulations: "the whole law". And **one** failure destroys our merit. Moreover, for any act to be pleasing to God
 - the motive must be right (the love of God)
 - the manner of doing it must be right (God's way)
 - the aim of doing it must be right (God's glory)

We cannot fulfil any of these conditions. We are therefore hopeless slaves. Salvation **by grace** is best for us! To add is to subtract!

iii. **God gives salvation freely because that best glorifies Christ** (Gal. 5:4).

If we can earn our own salvation we have no need of Christ. If we need to add anything to what Christ has done, then what he did was inadequate. But if our salvation is by Christ alone, **all** praise is due to him. If we will not wholly trust Christ to save us, we fall out of the stream of salvation by grace through Christ. We insult him. To add is to subtract!

Conclusion

Because salvation is the gift of grace to those who don't deserve it, the only way to disqualify yourself from receiving it is to pretend you do deserve it! To add is to subtract!

 **Focus Point:**
Pharisees and Sadducees

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders of the people in New Testament times. They were, however, opposed to each other. The Sadducees denied some doctrines which the Pharisees accepted.

The Pharisees (the name means “Separatist”) arose in the period between the Old and New Testaments. They were strict Jews who taught that no Jew should adopt any foreign customs but should meticulously keep the law of Moses. The Pharisees studied the law of Moses and worked out in great detail how each of those laws was to be kept in the society of their day. For example, it was lawful to wear stitched sandals on the Sabbath but unlawful to wear sandals with nails, because that would mean doing the work of lifting iron: work was forbidden on the Sabbath. It is easy to see how this kind of person could become cunning and hypocritical in nature. They concentrated on outward, ceremonial law-keeping. See Matthew 5:20, 16:6, 23:1-33.

The Sadducees (possibly the name means “righteous ones”) were probably an older religious party than the Pharisees and were usually drawn from the top wealthy class of society. The Sadducees made no attempt to adapt the law to different situations as did the Pharisees but sought to enforce it rigidly and literally as it was first written. They also denied the doctrines of the resurrection, the existence of angels and the predestination of God, claiming that not one of these truths was found in the law. They accepted nothing as truth but what could be found spelled

out in the law, or could be proved by human reason. See Matthew 22:23-33; Acts 23:6-9.

Both Pharisees and Sadducees were priests. During the time of Christ the Sadducees were the controlling influence on the Sanhedrin. Both parties died out with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in AD 70.



Over to you

Is there any way that you or your church could give the impression to the people in your congregation that they could gain acceptance with God through their own actions? Consider this carefully in case some of your people are looking to themselves rather than to the mercy of God (even though you may not know they are doing this).

What hope do your people have? Do they view their acceptance by God on Judgement Day with certainty or are they unsure? If the answer to the first question does not take the people beyond their earthly life or they answer “no” to the following question, what do you propose to do?

If you are a church leader, what are you looking for in those of your people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ?