

“Slave or Free?”

March 23, 2025

Galatians 5:1-12

I. Introduction

In [Romans 7:18-19](#) Paul summarized a problem we all have, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” Without the Holy Spirit, this describes all of us. Anyone who is truthful to himself must admit that he is really without hope. Or as Paul wrote later in [Romans 7:23-24](#), “But I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and make me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

There is no hope in this life; [Romans 3:23](#) says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” No one can be as good as he wants; we all fall short and sin. [Ecclesiastes 3:17](#) summarizes it this way, “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” There is no hope for the future either; [Romans 6:23](#) begins with the words: “For the wages of sin is death,” that is, an eternity in hell. This world is a valley of despair. Some try to cover this despair with mind numbing pride-filled selfishness—collecting more “toys,” some through legitimate ways, some through violence against others. Some resort to things like social justice, vainly trying to make a sinful world into God’s world. Some just give up and yield to a world of drugs and mental oblivion. Some resort to making more rules and regulations—man-made religion.

Legalism, works-based-salvation, has been man’s way of earning his salvation as he tries to cover his despair and sinfulness. But Paul had taught that salvation is a gift of mercy and grace from God. No one is worthy of it. No one can earn it. A person is justified, i.e., made right with God, only by God’s grace and by that person’s response in faith to that grace. On the cross Jesus purchased our pardon, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Paul has finished his 6 doctrinal arguments for justification through grace and not works as he compared grace and the Law; grace and legalism. Now in the last 2 chapters, Paul turned from argument to application, from the doctrinal to the practical. Contrary to some of the teachings of the Judaizers, Christian liberty, i.e., salvation without law or works, isn't a license to keep on sinning. Salvation isn't just believing on Jesus Christ, as [Romans 12:2](#) says, salvation is a lifelong process of becoming more Christlike through the power of the Holy Spirit transforming the believer from the inside out—“**Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**” This is sanctification. The life of genuine faith is more than the belief in divine truth; it also bears divine fruit. Using three comparisons, Paul began this section by showing that when grace is abandoned for Law or works, there is loss—under legalism there is loss.

II. Under legalism there is loss.

A. First, freedom is lost. In [verse 1](#) Paul wrote that “**it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.**” When the believers in Galatia trusted in Christ, they lost the yoke of servitude to sin and put on the yoke of Christ—turn to [Matthew 11:28-30](#). Freedom is the heart of the gospel. The yoke of Christ frees one to do God’s will, but Legalism enslaves with the impossible demands of forcing obedience to the Law. For the believer, no longer is the external force of Law needed to keep one in God’s will. Now freedom or, as some translations say, liberty, allows for the internal leading of the Holy Spirit of God. [Turn to Romans 8:1-4](#). Christians are led by the Holy Spirit “**to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do**” ([Eph. 2:10](#)). On the other hand, the religious legalist wears a yoke of slavery—slavery of obedience to the Law. To go back to Law or works, to go back to legalism, is to give up freedom for slavery. Freedom or liberty is lost when grace is abandoned for works.

B. Second, wealth is lost. Paul wrote in [verse 2](#), “**Christ will be of no value to you at all.**” It is bad enough that legalism robs a believer of his freedom, but it also robs him of his spiritual wealth in Christ; e.g., the peace of God, the fruit of the Spirit, “**the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time**” ([Titus 1:2](#)). The believer, who lives under Law, becomes a bankrupt slave.

God gave circumcision as a symbol or sign of His covenant of promise to the Jews ([Genesis 17:9-10](#)).

But, over time, most Jews looked on circumcision as having spiritual value in itself. To them it was not a reminder of God's gracious blessing but a means of earning His favor. Paul wasn't against circumcision; he had had Timothy circumcised ([Acts 16:1-3](#)). But if the Galatians let themselves be circumcised for the purpose of earning favor in God's eyes, they would lose all the benefits they had in Christ. In addition to losing their benefits, submitting to the Law would put them under obligation to obey all of the Law. As [James 2:10](#) says, “**For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.**” Legalism is an all or nothing proposition; one cannot pick and choose.

As Paul was writing to the Galatian churches, he was writing to two different groups of people. First, there were those who genuinely trusted in Jesus for salvation—the saved. The second group was made up of those who had gone through the motions or hadn't really made a decision yet, i.e., the unsaved. To those who were not saved, Paul was saying that they could not be saved; they could not gain any eternal benefit from Christ if they only trusted in circumcision and the Law. To those who were saved, he was saying that adding the Law or legalism to complete their salvation would lead to a lack of growth in their spiritual lives. To live by grace means to depend on God's abundant supply for every need. Liberty/freedom means depending on God's riches. This leads to growth in one's Christian walk. To live by Law means to depend on one's own strength—the flesh. Those that live by the flesh are left to get by without God's riches and this leads to spiritual malnourishment.

Back in [Galatians 5:4](#), Paul then wrote, “**You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.**” By following the Law, the Christians would fall out of the domain of God's grace. Contrary to the teaching of the Judaizers, to add circumcision and other works of the law to what Christ accomplished by grace is not to raise one's spiritual level but to severely lower it. Legalism doesn't please God—it offends Him. It doesn't bring a person closer to God, but it drives him away. Such a person is spiritually bankrupt.

Living by the flesh—the Law—interferes with living by the Spirit. Living by the flesh may even involve doing the right things but for the wrong reasons. For example, to worship God from the heart and for God's sake is to live by the Spirit. However, to worship God only outwardly or to impress others or God with one's supposed spirituality is to live by the flesh. When one lives by grace, he depends on the power of the Spirit; under the Law, one depends on himself and his own efforts. Nothing that is either done or not done in the flesh—even a religious ceremony—makes any difference in one's relationship to God. Only actions motivated by love are important—[turn to Matthew 22:34-40](#). Basically, Jesus was saying that everything one does should be motivated by love not Law.

When a believer walks by faith while depending on the Spirit of God, he is in the sphere of God's grace. All his needs are provided. Daily he experiences the riches of God's grace; at the same time, he can look forward to Jesus' return. In [John 14:3](#) Jesus said, “**I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.**” For those walking in the flesh—in legalism, the Law gives no promise for perfect righteousness in the future. [Turn to Gal. 3:23-25](#). The Law only prepared the way for the first coming of Christ—His life, death, burial, and resurrection; it cannot prepare the way for the second coming of Christ and eternal life in heaven with Him. The believer who chooses legalism robs himself of spiritual liberty and spiritual wealth. He chooses to put himself into bondage and bankruptcy. Finally....

C. Direction is lost. In [verse 7](#) Paul wrote, “**You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?**” They had begun well—they had accepted the Word of God, they had trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ, they had received the Holy Spirit. [Galatians 4:15](#) records that they had a deep joy that was seen by all. But now their direction was lost; their joy was lost.

The Judaizers had come. They had cut in on them and caused them to change direction and go on a “spiritual detour.” It wasn't God who had done this; [2 Thessalonians 2:13](#) says, “**God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.**” But now they were going in the wrong direction—salvation based on the Law and works. The Judaizers were preventing the unsaved from coming to Christ in faith and the saved from following Him in faith.

Paul then changed the figure from athletics and racing to cooking and yeast. In Scripture, yeast is generally pictured as a symbol of evil or sin. Just like a little yeast can grow and permeate a whole lump of dough, so a small amount of falsehood or sin can eventually corrupt the thinking and living of a large group of people. That's just what the false doctrine of the Judaizers had done. It had started small but now it was threatening to take over the church. But Paul had confidence in them. **“I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view.”** Ultimately, Paul prayed and hoped that they would reject the false teachings.

Among their distortions and lies, it seems that the Judaizers claimed that Paul preached circumcision just as they did. Because Timothy was half Jewish, [Acts 16:1-3](#) says that Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to minimize criticism from the Jews to whom they would minister together. But **“in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.”** Paul taught only the cross and the cross was offensive to the Jews, partly because they could not accept the idea of a suffering, much less a crucified, Messiah. But it was also offensive because it robbed them of their most distinctive outward signs of being Jewish—the Mosaic Law and circumcision.

Paul closed this section with one of the harshest statements he wrote in any letter. **“I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!”** Paul wasn't calling with a cruel desire for the Judaizers punishment—God will take care of that. His point was, *“If the Judaizers are so insistent on circumcision as means of pleasing God, why don't they go all the way and castrate themselves as the supreme act of religious devotion. If, like the pagans, they believe human achievement can earn divine favor, why don't they go to the pagan extremes of self-mutilation?”*

III. Conclusion

Legalism is still a problem today. Sadly, there are some people who feel insecure with liberty. They would rather be under the tyranny of some leader than to make their own decisions freely. There are some believers who are so frightened by the liberty they have in God's grace that they seek out a fellowship or group that is legalistic and dictatorial; someplace they can let others make their decisions for them. This is like an adult climbing back into the crib. Christians need to be growing—progressing from the milk of the

Gospel to the meat of God's Word. Turn to Hebrews 5:11-13. Every Christian must study the Scriptures so that he and she can walk as God would have them walk—not as someone else would have him walk.

2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Do your best, i.e., study, to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

The spirit of legalism doesn't suddenly appear in a church. Paul warned that, like yeast or leaven, it begins small, it grows, sometimes slowly sometimes quickly, but eventually it permeates the whole church. In some cases, the motives that encourage legalism are good, but the methods are not scriptural. For example, baptism and the Lord's Table are commanded—BUT, contrary to some teachings, neither one is needed for salvation. A person is saved through faith alone. Baptism and the Lord's Table are to be done for the love of Jesus Christ and in obedience to His Lordship not for salvation.

It isn't wrong to have standards in a church, but we should never think that the standards will make anybody spiritual, or that the keeping of the standards is evidence of spirituality. Except as it demonstrates the inner righteousness of a person's heart, the outward is totally unimportant and worthless. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Every Christian has the responsibility to watch for the beginnings of legalism, that first bit of yeast that infects his life or the church body and which can over time grow into a serious problem. Such legalism takes away God-given freedom, God's gifts, and God's directions.

The believer who lives within God's grace is free, rich, and running in the path that leads to reward and fulfillment. The believer who abandons grace for legalism & works is a slave, bankrupt, and a runner on the wrong path. He is losing out of so much. The only way to become a winner is to get rid of the yeast—the false doctrine that mixes Law and grace, and yield to the Spirit of God.

On what do you base your salvation? On what do you base your Christian walk—God's Word or man's word? Why do you do the things you do—because of fear of punishment from God or some other authority or for the accolades of those around you or from love of God and love of your neighbor? Don't be a misdirected, bankrupt slave—be a free, rich, on track child of God.