

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 14: Fallen from Grace (5:2-12)

This letter to the Galatians can be broken into three sections: Biography, Theology, and Ethics. In chapters 1 and 2, Paul gave the Galatians his autobiography and stamped his (AAA), authentic apostolic authority over them. This paved the way for the doctrine that he would write in chapters 3 and 4. Here he spent two chapters preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here he taught how sinners are justified by faith alone, by God's grace alone, in Christ alone, to God's glory alone. But Paul doesn't end his letter by filling the Galatians heads with proper theology, he's also interested in seeing them live out their theology in all of their lives, and this is how he ends this letter.

So, here we are in the final section of this book! Paul has just begun this section of the letter with verse 1 which we ended with last time, **"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** When Paul wrote about the 'yoke of slavery', he was referring to the Old Testament law, which was considered by the Judaizers to be the principle means of justification. I say principle means, because it's not that the Judaizers slammed the door shut on the concept of the grace of God, they just believed that it was grace + obedience to the law which secured justification. It was a saying among the Jews of that day to refer to the law of Moses as "the yoke of the commandments" or "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." So it was a direct poke in the eye when Paul referred to the law of "the yoke of slavery". It is ironic that the Jews would call the law a yoke of anything, which speaks of the law as something that is oppressive and burdensome, and yet they never connected the dot as to how the law enslaved them.

The one thing in particular that the Jews were trying to superimpose upon these Galatian believers was the necessity to obey the Mosaic law and get circumcised first, if they were ever to be right with God. We have covered this already a few times throughout the study of this book, but here Paul brings up the issue again in verse 2, **"Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you."** Since the birth of the Jewish nation, the one physical sign that separated God's people from those who weren't was the sign of circumcision. Many Jews, even after becoming Jews, still held on to that sign with great heart. There were some Jews in that day who said (Acts 15:1), **"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** So we see how far the Jews had taken the issue of circumcision. It went far beyond a physical sign of an inward reality, it became a necessary, saving act.

Basically, the doctrinal error of the Judaizers is just the same as any other error mankind has concocted to get saved. They had twisted God's plan and purpose for circumcision, and they elevated it to a sinful place. The reason why God ever instituted circumcision in the first place was to paint a picture to men of their sinfulness and the need to be purified. But circumcision was just that, a picture. The removal of the skin on the reproductive organ told the Jews that this need would be required generation after generation, and it signified the removal of sin and evil from the heart. God was always after the heart, the spiritual reality of the physical picture. Written in the law of Moses, Deuteronomy 10:6 says, **"And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."** Jeremiah the prophet quotes the Lord in Jeremiah 4:4, **"Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem."** Listen to the sharp warning given to the Jews who rested in their physical circumcision a little later in Jeremiah 9:24-26, **"But let him who boasts**

boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD. Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.”

Paul wasn't against the act of circumcision, what he warned against was the hope of acceptance by God through the physical act of circumcision. By trusting in the physical act of circumcision for justification, it rendered Christ to be of no advantage. Why would a person need justification, when they can justify themselves? That would be as offensive as paying for the dinner bill of the rich man at the table next to you. He's well capable of paying the bill himself, and takes pride in not needing any help financially. The image is really quite simple: Either people need the grace of God, or they don't, there is no middle ground. For the Galatians to listen to the plea of the Judaizers and seek circumcision, it was for the purpose of justification. They could either seek justification through Christ alone, and obtain it, or they could seek justification through circumcision and miss it. They could either seek justification through God's grace, or they could fail to obtain it through human merit.

Paul's point in verse 2 was not to say that circumcision itself was sinful, but that using circumcision as a means of justification was essentially telling Christ that what He did sacrificially for sinners was insufficient. We don't have the same thing happening in the church today, but we have the same principle at work amongst people in churches today. There are those who base their holiness and acceptance before God on the merits of not missing one church service since 1993. There are others who base their holiness on the number of people they have shared the gospel with who now attend church. The list of things that people will do to show to God and others that they're serious about being saved is endless. And it's not that doing those things are sinful (just like circumcision wasn't, and still isn't sinful), it's that doing those things as a means of justification is essentially the same thing as paying for your own bill.

As spiritually enslaved people, we cannot purchase our own freedom from sin because we're enslaved and we don't have any money. We don't have the means to attain our own freedom. Our freedom needs to be purchased on our behalf by God. Therefore, Christ is our advantage as verse 2 puts it, when we place our faith and trust in His finished work alone. Christ is the one who sets us free, and Paul was worried of the Galatians slipping right back into slavery. There are three fatal consequences of being someone who willingly places themselves back in slavery once Christ has set them free:

First, *Jesus Christ becomes useless to us*. This is the point that I've been making over the last page. You can't have your cake and eat it too. You're either saved by grace or by law, by faith or by works. It's literally all of Christ, or nothing at all. Listen to the illustration that Phil Ryken gives, "*Consider the man who had an old baseball autographed by Babe Ruth. The man had heard that the ball might be valuable, so one day he decided to sell it. He was worried however, because he could see that the signature was so badly faded. In order to make it clearer, he took out his baseball and carefully traced over the letters with a marking pen: "B-A-B-E R-U-T-H."* The effect was to obliterate the real autograph, so that by the time he was finished, he had turned something priceless into something worthless. It is the same with Jesus Christ. His finished work cannot be refinished; it can only be destroyed. What Christ did on the

cross and through the empty tomb must be received by faith alone. If we try to add our works to his work, then his work no longer does us any good.”¹

The second fatal consequence of placing ourselves back into slavery to the law once we’ve tasted the freedom found in Christ, is that we become *debtors to God’s law*. We find this taught in verse 3, **“I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.”** For a Gentile new believer in Christ to accept circumcision (in the attempt to justify himself), he was tying himself to the rest of the law of God. If he entered in through the gate of circumcision, than he placed himself under the rest of the law.

Perfect obedience is the necessary requirement to enter into God’s presence. If circumcision is the way to justification that is chosen, than a perfect fulfillment of the rest of God’s law is also required. Since Jesus Christ is the only man who perfectly obeyed the entire law of God, that poses a problem for everyone else. The problem that plagues mankind is that **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** (Rom 3:23) As Paul said earlier in the chapter to the Galatians in 3:10, **“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed by everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”** Why is it a curse upon everyone? Because no one is capable of keeping the whole law, it crushed everyone under its heavy load.

The third fatal consequence of placing ourselves back into bondage to the law is that *we are cut off from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul continues in verse 4, **“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”** The word chosen in the ESV is ‘severed’, but a more pictorial word for us might be ‘cut off’. IOW, those who try to justify themselves but ‘cutting off’ their foreskin in circumcision are literally ‘cutting themselves off’ from Christ. In the Old Covenant time, the physical mark of circumcision separated the Jews from the rest of the people of earth. It was a mark that symbolised an inner spiritual reality that was true of only God’s chosen people. It was also a sign that said to others that if he ever decided to reject his God, that this same cutting off would happen to him. But that was the Old Covenant, now under the New Covenant (inaugurated and completed by Christ), there was no need for circumcision any longer. It was no longer necessary for believers to identify themselves as God’s chosen people through this mark.

Getting circumcised for the Galatians was actually to sever their relationship with Christ. It’s very important for us at this point to take a trail down the path of handling the question: Can a believer in Christ truly fall from grace and lose their salvation? And the answer to that question is easy: No! So let’s answer quickly why the correct answer is ‘no’, and then let’s understand what Paul means when he says that the Galatians have fallen away from grace.

John 10:28-29 is a great passage that teaches us OSAS (Once saved, always saved...I think I just made up OSAS). **“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”** Who’s stronger than God? No one. Who gives salvation to us? God. Who can take our salvation from us? No one...not even us. Read [Romans 8:28-30](#). So if our salvation is secure, how can a believer fall from grace? The biblical answer again is that they can’t. However, on this side of Heaven, we can’t know the true intent of the heart of everyone in this church. Most may be true children of God, but a few may be great pretenders. There are those in the church who spring up

¹ Ryken, Philip Graham, *Reformed Expository Commentary* P&R Publishing, 2005, p. 199

quickly with life, but at some point before the harvest they are choked out and they die. There will be some who will live in the church for lengthy periods of time who will for various reasons leave the church for wicked reasons. What scripture teaches is not that they have lost their salvation, but that they never had salvation in the first place. So for someone to have tasted the gospel and even positively affirmed it at one point in their life, only to reject the gospel and choose another path towards righteousness, this is nothing more than to scorn God's grace, and there is no other means to obtain it. Once you sever Christ from your life, there is no other way.

Martin Luther wrote in his commentary to the Galatians, *"For just as someone on a ship is drowned regardless of the part of the ship from which he falls into the sea, so someone who falls away from grace cannot help perishing. The desire to be justified by the law, therefore, is shipwreck; it is exposure to the surest peril of eternal death. What can be more insane and wicked than to want to lose the grace and favor of God and to retain the law of Moses, whose retention makes it necessary for you to accumulate wrath and every other evil for yourself? Now if those who seek to be justified on the basis of the moral law fall away from grace, where, I ask, will those who fall who, in their self-righteousness, seek to be justified on the basis of their traditions and vows? To the lowest depths of hell!"*

Verse 5, **"For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness."** There is only one way that a person is declared righteous before God, and it is encapsulated right here in this verse. Through the Holy Spirit, by faith in Christ, is our hope found. We live in the middle of the 'already', and the 'not yet'. We believe in the 'already' finished redemptive work of Christ on our behalf. Because of Christ's work, we are already declared righteous by God because the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. And we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness, the 'not yet', when our sanctification will be complete, and we will be forever with our Lord in glory.

Verse 6, **"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."** The interpretation of this verse is quite simple, but the application of this verse expands beyond circumcision. The scope of this verse expands to every religious act, whether to do the act, or abstain from it, it doesn't pad your spiritual resume. We're not justified by our efforts! The only thing that our religiosity proves in the truest sense, is that our hearts have been reborn by God. In fact, the life that has been born of God cannot remain idle, but must bear much fruit for righteousness. Read [John 15:1-8](#). Faith works through love, our verse says. Our faith works through love, but our love (our works) are never the alternative to faith.

We won't get to this verse this lesson, but in just a few verses, Paul writes in 5:14, **"For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"** What does that mean Paul? How can I fulfill the law by loving my neighbor? First of all, it might help to clarify that your 'neighbor' in this verse is not referring to your next-door neighbor. For some of us, that would be easy, for others...not so much. Your 'neighbor' is literally the person you are closest to at this point. So, consider the person you are sitting nearest too. Would you ever steal from that person? Would you ever slander that person? Would you ever murder that person? Well, why not? (Probably because you've read and correctly understood God's law, right?) No, we don't need a law to know those things. Because we love the person we're sitting next too, we naturally fulfill the requirements of the law.

Read [Galatians 5:7-12](#). Paul has just spent some time warning the Galatians of the dangers accepting circumcision, and going down that path of achieving justification through law-keeping. And now, he's going to expose the wicked character of the Judaizers, to further warn the Galatians to stay away from

them. He will list for them, five characteristics of the Judaizers that reveal their ungodliness. These characteristics are not only true of them, but of every other false religious teacher.

Verse 7, **“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”** The first ungodly characteristic of these Judaizers is that they hinder people from obeying the truth. Paul begins the verse using one of his typical sports analogies, **“You were running well.”** Paul must have been a sports fan. He referenced boxing in 1 Cor. 9:26. He referenced wrestling in Ephesians 6:12. And he references track and field a lot. Many times in his writing, Paul likens the life of a Christian (from re-birth to glory) as a footrace, or a marathon. For example, in Acts 20:24, Paul writes, **“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”** And even at the end of his ministry, we read, 2 Timothy 4:7, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”**

The Christian life truly is a marathon race to the finish. It’s a little difficult for me to share from first-hand experience the trials and difficulties of running a marathon. I run the length a two telephone polls on the side of the road and I’m winded. But I think we can put our imaginary caps on and try to follow Paul’s analogy. Marathons are very long. And the longer the race goes on, fatigue sets in, joints start to ache, muscles tighten and cramp, nerve endings start to fire, dehydration sets in. The finish line truly awaits only those who have prepared their bodies to endure until the end.

Paul tells the Galatians that they started their race well. One thing that we should note about the track and field events of that day is that they didn’t run on an oval track with set lanes for each runner. The race was a “to the pole and back” type of race, something like every one of us did as kids...except kids today because all they do is watch YouTube and play video games. So you can imagine when a number of athletes begin at one point, and race to another point, that there were times when they would jockey for position, and cut one another off. This is the exact image that Paul is using in verse 7 when he used the word **“hindered”**. He used the Greek word *enekopsen*, which means to ‘cut in line’. It was illegal to push another athlete out of the way, but you could interfere with their path, causing your opponents to shift out of the way.

Another thing I’d like to point out in verse 7 is the rhetorical question that Paul asks, **“Who hindered you...?”** We know it was the Judaizers, the Galatian readers knew it was the Judaizers, and so did Paul. This isn’t even the first time in the letter that Paul has rhetorically asked this question, in 3:1 he wrote, **“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”** Perhaps a more modern way that we’d say it is, *“Who do they think they are to have undermined my apostolic authority and lead you astray with error?”*

Finally in verse 7, I’d like to highlight the characteristic of the Judaizers that they were hindering people from **the truth**. The truth that Paul means, is the truth that is above all other truths, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is a truth that goes beyond simply knowing and affirming this truth, as truth. This truth must be obeyed. These Judaizers were hindering the Galatians from obeying the truth of the gospel. When he speaks of obeying the truth, Paul is not speaking of their obedience to the gospel as though their salvation hinged upon their obedience. That was the argument of the Judaizers. Every true Christian is justified by their faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The Christian’s obedience to the gospel has to do with the obvious correlation between the seed of faith that God planted, and the obvious fruit that ought to come from that seed. What a Christian believes, and how a Christian behaves cannot be separated.

These Judaizers were the fore-fathers of every false teachers who would come after them, leading people in the pews of churches into grave theological error. Peter warned of these false teachers in 2 Peter 2:1-2, **“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.”**

The second characteristic of these Judaizers was their ungodliness, verse 8, **“This persuasion is not from Him who calls you.”** As our Pastor has taught us in his preaching, *ungodliness* does not necessarily mean that a person is living a deplorably wicked life. There are many people who we know, and love, who are ‘good’ people, who are good citizens, and morally upright. They are generous people, and are kind to their neighbors. Some of those people may acknowledge the reality of God, some of them may deny Him, but they nevertheless live their lives without Him. To be ungodly is to simply live your life without God in it. This was what the Judaizers were doing. It’s not that they denied the existence of God. It’s not that they were living in gross immorality. They were ungodly because when it came to salvation, primarily justification, they took God out of the equation, when in reality God is the entire equation.

Paul reminded them that the hindrance to disobey the gospel came from the Judaizers, and not from the God who called them to life. The language of ‘calling’ would have reminded the Galatians that salvation is of the Lord from start to finish. And this isn’t the first time in this letter Paul has written this way, back in 1:6, **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”** Here, Paul even goes so far as to link their calling with the grace of God. By definition, grace is something that is given to someone who does not deserve it. Grace is a gift, not a reward for a sufficient amount of obedience. In this case, the grace that God has given is forgiveness for sin, through the penal substitution of Christ. These ungodly Judaizers were cutting them off in the race, and they were throwing them off track. They had thrown them down the path of works-righteousness, with the message of obedience to the law through circumcision for salvation. Obviously, this message is contrary to the gospel, and it didn’t come from God.

The third characteristic of the Judaizers was that they were contaminating the church, spreading their false message through it like an aggressive cancer. Verse 9, **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”** Throughout the scriptures, ‘leaven’ represents sin in the person. This analogy isn’t Paul’s alone, he borrowed it from Christ Himself who said in Matthew 16:6, **“Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”** And then later in verse 12, **“Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”** The teaching analogy of leaven would have been easily understood by all. A small amount of leaven would permeate the entire loaf, either positively or negatively. In this example, the character of the Judaizers was one that infected the entire church at Galatia.

The fourth characteristic of the Judaizers was the fact that they were amongst those who would be judged by God one day. Verse 10, **“I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is trouble you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.”** As confident as Paul was in God’s sovereignty, that He would not allow the Galatians to fully and finally abandon the true gospel, he was equally confident that the Judaizers would bear the ultimate penalty and punishment of God for their

actions. The word for 'penalty' is *krima*, which means divine judgment. There will come a day when not just the Judaizers, but every false teacher, will face the eternal judgment of God. Read 2 Peter 2:1-3, 9.

The fifth characteristic of the Judaizers is that they persecuted the true teachers. Verse 11, **"But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed."** We already know from earlier in the letter that the Judaizers were attacking Paul's credibility. Way back in 1:10 of this letter, we get the understanding that they were spreading lies that Paul was actually altering the message to please the people. Paul wrote, **"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."** The Judaizers were doing what they could to tear down Paul's credibility, and ultimately to tear down the gospel. Now, here in chapter 5, we see how they were spreading the lie that Paul still taught the importance of circumcision. They likely would have used the fact that Paul had the half-Jew Timothy circumcised (as recorded in Acts 16:1-3), but they would have missed the point of it all. Paul had Timothy circumcised, not because it had anything at all to do with his salvation (because Timothy was already a redeemed, justified believer in Christ), but because Timothy would never have the attentive ear of his Jewish audience to give them the gospel without first being circumcised. Later, in Acts 21, we see how the Judaizers were spreading the lie that Paul was encouraging everyone to abandon the law of God altogether, as though it had no purpose anymore. So we read in 21:21-26 how Paul actually engaged in a Mosaic ritual to prove that he had not demanded that Jewish Christians reject their traditions. Of course, this engaging of Paul would have led his critics to say that he held the law that he now argued against in Galatians. We understand Paul's reasoning behind all of this, as he explains it so well in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

In a nut-shell, the Judaizers were trying to discredit Paul, by spreading the lie that he was basically on the same side as they were, teaching the same things. His answer in verse 11 is this, *"If I'm still teaching the same things that they are, why are they attacking me?"* If Paul was basically teaching the same thing as the Judaizers, they wouldn't have been so offended at the message of the cross. Paul wrote, **"In that case the offense of the cross has been removed."** We know how the gospel is offensive to people today, and certainly it would have been offensive to the Judaizers in the same way, but they would have had another reason to be offended. The Jews awaited a coming Messiah who would rule and reign. They awaited a time when the Jewish nation would conquer the world, and they would rule and reign with their conquering king. The Christian message was one that acknowledged the coming of this Messiah, but who also acknowledged that He bled and died on a Roman cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of all who would believe in Him. This message of a hated Jew who was executed in the most violent ways was a far cry from the expectation of the people. So, the Jews were offended that anyone would dare to claim Jesus Christ as the long awaited Messiah. The secondary offense was taken by the fact that, if the gospel were true, then the Mosaic law served no purpose in salvation, which robbed them of their religion. This secondary offense is the parallel to how all people are offended by the cross today. Whether religious, or non-religious, all people trust in something to validate their worth, or their goodness. The message of the cross is one that first strips you naked of your goodness, and exposes the desperate wicked condition of the heart. The message of the cross then points you to the only way to be made clean before God, Jesus Christ. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the recipient, this message will always be considered foolish and offensive.

Finally, Paul will end our lesson by penning what has been to many, a very offensive statement, verse 12, **"I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!"** Without question, this may be the

harshest statement that you will find in any of Paul's letters. The word for 'emasculate' is *apokopto*, which means to 'mutilate' the body. I think the ESV gets the right translation, as it gets to the point of castration. Paul's point is poetic, he doesn't actually wish physical harm on them. What he means is this: If the Jews were so sure that cutting off the foreskin of their reproductive part somehow pleased God and ushered in their salvation, then why didn't they swing for the fences and just cut the whole thing off!

Every Christian needs to understand that his hope of righteousness with God is based on no merits of his own, but on the perfect righteousness of Christ. Any attempt to place men back under a system of laws designed to win righteousness is contrary to the purpose for which Christ died. He set believers free so that they might walk in the freedom which belongs to sons of God. Stand firm, therefore, in this freedom, says Paul, and resist every attempt to re-enslave you.