

*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm then and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
Listen! I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.
I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.
You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly await the hope of righteousness.

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working itself out in love.
You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.*

*A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view,
and that the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.*

But if I, brothers and sisters, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted?

In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish that those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Galatians 5:1-15

"Faith...Waiting for the Hope of Righteousness"

For most of this letter, Paul has used stories from old Israel's heritage to convince Christian disciples from faraway, Greeks and Romans and Celts, that they need not enslave themselves to old Israel's customs to do business with Israel's God and Israel's Savior. So we have learned from Paul about Moses, the man we are told in the book of Hebrews, God hired as that household slave to both humble and toughen God's people so that, when a Savior came calling, their hearts would be soft enough to believe and their minds would be agile enough to understand and trust the gospel the Savior would teach them to save their souls.

And, going even further back than Moses, Paul has taught us about Abraham, who himself was from faraway Babylon, who himself was uncircumcised and followed no law on the night he believed God's promise about a child that God would send Abraham and Sarah, a child who would have more children, and they would have more children until finally they became the nation of Israel, as many people as there were stars in the sky, and one of those descendants would become the Savior God promised who would bless the families of all the faraway peoples. So God carefully marked the descendants of Abraham by circumcising the boys, physically marking them as that race of people through whom a Savior would come when the time was right.

All God's men were circumcised, and all God's people were kosher for fourteen hundred years after Moses gave his law to the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai. So the Jews reasonably expected that all that effort at being different, all that attention to shadows and symbols they scarcely understood would amount to something when the time came full and God sent a Savior their way. But strangely, God sent them a man who was ordinary, not a rabbi or priest, not the sort of warrior hero God had sent so often in the past.

The Savior emerged from a carpenter's shop ten miles from nowhere. And he was unarmed, and followed by riff raff and, while he wrestled heart and soul to evoke faith from old Israel, he often found faith in the strangest people from the strangest places, a Samaritan woman with a shady marital resume, a Syro-phonician woman from Baal's hometown, a tax collector in business for the Romans, strangely devout centurions, enemy soldiers, whose day job was make sure the Emperor got his tribute before the rabbi's got anything. So from a Jewish point of view, Jesus' kingdom was going topsy turvy even while he wandered the country side and it only got worse once Jesus was out the grave, and gone to heaven, to send the Spirit out on the move.

So now, by the time Paul writes this letter, people all over the world, uncircumcised, not kosher people from everywhere were giving their lives to Christ without learning the marks and signs and disciplines Moses had used to keep God's people in line while the Savior was still on the way. So Moses' law had given way to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. All of a sudden, all kinds of temples on all sorts of hilltops had gone obsolete. The pageantry and pictures and symbols were no longer the point. Now, where two or more gathered in his name, Jesus had promised he would be there, invisible but really in play, bread and wine on ordinary tables, ordinary people baptized in lakes and pools, finding Christ, making promises, becoming family and starting life over.

The problem being then, as I think it is today, that so much of Jesus' kingdom was invisible, intangible, unmarked, unprogrammed. Old Israel was its own culture, on its own particular calendar, its own clothing and food, a rich and beautiful culture, much of it straight from God, and worth learning! But now that Jesus had come, Moses' law was only valuable to the extent that its shadows and symbols pointed to Christ. At the Last Supper, blocks away from the old temple, Jesus told his men how to find his Father, he said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me."* Paul wrote something similar: *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm then, and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery."*

In other words Paul was saying, "Don't go back to Moses' schoolhouse, playing with blocks and, shadows and symbols and pictures when the Spirit is here moving in your hearts, when Christ is here whenever two or more of you gather. We heard Jesus say last week, he promised, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." So today Paul warns his readers, and us, "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm then, and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery.*"

He goes on to say: "*Listen! I... say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no help to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*" And Paul's point here is not that circumcision is only, ever bad and no one should ever do it, his point is that circumcision had served its purpose. From Abraham right down through Jesus, circumcision had marked the people from whom the Savior would come and, so now that Jesus had lived and died and risen and ascended, there was no spiritual benefit to marking Abraham's descendants.

And the danger here was that Greeks and Romans and Celts, who had already given their lives to Christ, might imagine that the kosher discipline Moses taught was the necessary, visible, tangible program one had to follow to be faithful to Christ. But the opposite was true. The law was given to define and illustrate the great gulf that exists between our sin and God's holiness. The law was given to break our hearts and to undermine our confidence in our own innate goodness.

Isaiah taught it, seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet sang: "*For so says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and... the heart of the contrite.'*" So God has two places he's willing to dwell, up high in heaven where there is no hint of wrong and sin, and down low with people who know they're lost and want his grace.

Paul put it this way, he wrote: "*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*" The danger is that people like us would buy into some physical, tangible program and reform ourselves to the point where we forget just how low we can fall the moment we stop depending on Christ and walking in his Spirit. Jesus taught, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples...*" Jesus warned at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that, when he returns, there will be people boasting of how good they'd become: "*...did we not prophecy...did we not do mighty works in your name.*" But Jesus won't buy any of that, "*Away from me,*" he'll say, "*I never knew you!*"

Paul aims to be on the other side of the ledger, he writes: "*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly await the hope of righteousness.*" The point being that the righteousness isn't entirely there yet! Even forgiven, even born again, Paul knows better than to boast of where he is right now. So he leans on the Spirit and believes in the promise and he hopes for a righteousness that isn't entirely there yet. What did he say in our Call to Worship? "*Whatever was gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*"

Paul banks on an invisible, intangible relationship with Jesus to make him the man God has already declared him to be. He writes: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails for anything, but only faith working itself out in love.*" Once Jesus is in play in our lives, only trusting him, only working out the heartbreaks and obstacles of life with him and with each other "*in love,*" Paul writes, will get us to that lowly, contrite place where a holy God can live in us and through us.

Think of Abraham and Sarah and the circus they lived, waiting for God to send Isaac their way. Paul closes by warning that we are not immune to that kind of drama ourselves. We are free to follow Jesus, not bound by any human program anyone might impose on us. But that freedom entails bringing the desires and passions of our flesh into the presence of Jesus, and under the guidance of his Spirit to learn a different way of life, founded on the grace God extends to us, and fueled by the love only his Spirit can provide.