

## Mere Christianity

Galatians 5:1-25

By [Wiley Lowry](#)

I'd invite you to turn in your Bibles or look on your prayer sheets to Galatians chapter 5. Louis Armstrong is widely considered to be the greatest trumpet player in the history of Jazz. When his professional career was really taking off in the years around 1920, nobody had ever heard anybody play the trumpet like him before or he was probably playing the cornet more at that time. And when you hear the common story or the history or biography of Armstrong you hear words like, "genius", "virtuoso", and "prodigy." It's like his skill on the cornet or trumpet was unexplainable. It couldn't be described; it was incredible. It really made his story. When you hear his story it makes his story larger than life; it defies explanation. But really, when you look at his life, his talent was derived more from a set of experiences and the place where he grew up and hours and hours and hours of practice. But that story is not as sensational. It's more common and mundane. We like the sensational; we like the things that are incredible. We're drawn to those kinds of things. I think that's why we're drawn to conspiracy theories.

In some ways the ministry of the Holy Spirit is like that. The Holy Spirit produces incredible work in people's lives. He convicts of sin, regenerates, forgives us of our sins, draws us in faith, unites us with Christ, gives us eternal life. And we'll see in just a little while the fruit of the Spirit that come through His ministry. There are incredible results and so we want to assign more sensational effects that go along with His ministry so we may try to focus on tongues or ecstatic experiences or miraculous healings and those kinds of things when, on the contrary, the Holy Spirit really works quietly and behind the scenes in a very mundane kind of way but producing these great results. So we'll see that in Galatians. That's what Paul really exhorts the Galatians to do - to stand firm in faith, to keep in step with the Spirit. That's the way that God grows Christians and the way that He builds His church.

So let's pray again and we'll look to His Word.

*Father, we do thank You for Your Word and we thank You that You have given us Your Spirit, that we don't come to this with our own eyes, with hearts unaided, but that we come to Your Word with Your Spirit to help us and to guide us and to direct us and to lead us in truth and produce fruit in our lives. We pray that You*

*would do that today. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

Galatians 5 verse 1:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

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 wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through 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 the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why and I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. 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.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

The grass withers and the flowers fall but the Word of our God endures forever.

I want us to see three things in the passage. Verses 1 through 6 - the flesh and bondage. Verses 7 through 15 - freedom and love. And then in verses 16 to 25 - unity and the Spirit.

## **I. The Flesh and Bondage**

In verse 1 in our passage Paul writes, "For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Jim Boice says that this is the key phrase of the entire epistle. The key verse of the entire epistle. What Paul is doing is he's continuing an argument or an exhortation that he began back in chapter 1 and he's worked his way up until this point. He says that he's astonished, back in chapter 1, he's astonished that the Galatians were deserting the way of the Gospel, that they were turning to a different gospel, which in all actuality was no gospel at all; it was a false doctrine. It was heresy. And they were turning away from the Gospel and turning to this false teaching. And Paul is concerned in this letter to combat and to put down those teachers, the false teachers who are promoting this kind of theology. What they were promoting was a way of life in which they would have said, "Yes, you can trust in Jesus for salvation, Jesus forgives your sin, but you also must add to it circumcision. So you can trust in Christ but also you must do these manmade ordinances to be right with God, to find the righteousness that God requires. Jesus plus circumcision equals salvation." That was their message.

### **Striving in Vain: Seeking to fulfill God's Promises by Works of the Flesh**

We know about circumcision that it was the covenant sign that God had given to Abraham as a sign of His promise to confirm that promise to Abraham and to set them apart, his seed, as God's chosen people. And yet it was not this external mark of circumcision that made Abraham right with God. We read elsewhere in Scripture that "the righteous shall live by faith." And that's what Paul shows in his argument. If we go back to chapter 4 he's talking about, he refers again to Abraham and he reminds people of the way that the promise was fulfilled to Abraham and the way that Abraham, at one point, had tried to go a different way. Remember, he tried to rely on the flesh, he tried to produce the seed, produce the promise, fulfill the promise of God by going and doing fleshly means through Hagar, his wife, Sarah's maidservant. That was the way he tried to fulfill God's promise and Paul is saying that that was not the way to fulfill the promise, but it was through faith that God fulfills His promise to Abraham. Same thing for us. It's by faith that God fulfills His promises to us.

And so what Paul says is, by accepting the message of these false teachers and by following their demands, the Galatians were actually submitting themselves to a yoke of slavery, to a yoke of bondage. Paul writes in verse 2 there, if you look there, that "to accept circumcision makes Christ of no advantage - Christ will be

of no advantage to you.” He says it would obligate a person to keep the whole law. Paul’s asking the question, “Where do you find your righteousness? Where do you find your justification?” To add anything to Christ’s work is a denial of grace. It makes Christ’s work insufficient. It severs them from Christ is what he says there, and it therefore leaves them standing on their own merit. And if you stand on your own merit he says they’re required to meet all the Law’s demands. He is obligated to keep the whole Law. It’s slavery to the Law; it’s bondage. And Paul’s giving us here Gospel arithmetic. He saying, “To add anything to Christ, to add anything to the Gospel, is actually taking away from Christ’s work. Addition to the Gospel is actually subtraction. It’s taking away from God’s glory. It’s taking away from Christ’s power and the glory of His work on the cross for us. It leaves nothing in its place.”

C.S. Lewis really addresses that well I think in *The Screwtape Letters*. If you’ve read *The Screwtape Letters* you know it’s a book where C.S. Lewis has two demons. One is a superior demon and one’s an under-demon. And they’re writing letters back and forth and they’re discussing a patient, it’s a Christian, and they’re trying to tempt him and to destroy him and to lead him astray. And Screwtape is writing to Wormwood and he writes these words to Wormwood. He says, “The real trouble about the set your patient is living in is that it is merely Christian. They all have individual interests, of course, but the bond remains mere Christianity. What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call ‘Christianity and’ - you know, ‘Christianity and the crisis, Christianity and the new psychology, Christianity and the new order, Christianity and faith healing, Christianity and psychical research, Christianity and vegetarianism, Christianity and spelling reform.’ If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference.”

### **“Christianity and....”**

That really captures what Paul is talking about here. We could be tempted; there’s always a temptation to add something to Christianity, to add something to the Gospel. The problem is that mere Christianity is, as Lewis calls it, it really is damaging to pride. It hurts our self-esteem. It tells us that we have nothing that we can do, nothing that we can attribute to our salvation. We want something to contribute. We want something that we can measure, that we can look at, and even measure ourselves against somebody else. And yet the Gospel won’t allow us to do that. The Gospel says, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to the cross I cling.” We have no merit. We have no righteousness of our own. There’s nothing that we have that commends us over somebody else, but on the contrary, we only boast in Christ’s righteousness. Our only boast is in Christ and what He has done for us. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, as we rest in the work of Christ alone. And that work is accomplished in us by the work of the Holy Spirit. And that’s what Paul is saying here. The Holy Spirit makes that work a reality in our lives, but it’s by faith alone through the grace of Christ alone.

To a certain extent I think the believers in Galatia may have agreed to that; they could have affirmed that statement - grace alone through faith alone. They may have said their "amen" to what Paul is writing to them. After all, the Spirit had begun the work of grace in their lives. The problem came when they had to go through a time of waiting. They knew that they had been declared righteous, that God had justified them, and yet they could look at their lives and see individual sins that were continuing to show up - bitterness, divisiveness, conflict in the church. And there was a frustration there, a frustration in that time of waiting. It's difficult for us to wait. The fruit of actual righteousness was not yet complete in their lives and they needed a shortcut. They wanted to look somewhere else. And Paul says, if you look there, he says, "Through the Spirit by faith we eagerly wait the hope of righteousness." Paul's stressing that Christian growth is generated by the same agency as Christian conversion, that sanctification occurs by the same power as justification, that is, through the Spirit and it is by faith. The same Gospel that begins the Christian life continues it and will complete the Christian life. It is Christ that says, "He who began a good work in us will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus," as Paul writes elsewhere. So Paul can say circumcision makes no difference but it's rather faith working through love and not adding outward means to it.

We all face that tendency. I don't know what it may be in your own life that you may be tempted to add to the Gospel, but C.S. Lewis mentioned Christianity and vegetarianism - green concerns, health concerns. It could be Christianity and a certain evangelistic technique. It could be Christianity and a certain schooling method or Christianity and a certain parenting technique. All those things, they could be good things, but to add to the Gospel is actually subtracting to the sufficiency of Christ's work and it leads to devastating results as Paul will get to here in just a second.

## **II. Freedom and Love**

He says there in verses 7 through 14, he has some really strong words, he says that this teaching of circumcision plus the Gospel, Christ plus circumcision, is not from God. He says that it has the tendency to infiltrate the church and to spread through the whole thing like leaven spreads through a lump of dough. And he says he has confidence that not only would his view prevail but that the troublemakers would actually face the penalty against their teaching.

If you look there again in the word there in verse 12 he says, "I wish that those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" He says, "You're so interesting in cutting and in circumcision, I wish you'd go the whole way." It's some strong words; it's pretty jarring. It catches us off guard and it reminds us in some ways of Christ's words in Luke when he says that for those who would lead His little ones astray it would be better if they would attach a millstone to their neck and cast them into the depths of the sea. Paul is passionately committed to protecting

the Gospel and defending the honor of Christ. Our minds, our ears, in some way are so accustomed to political correctness and kind of sensitivity in the speech around us but these words unsettle us a little bit, to hear such strong words against false teachers. To think, "Why is this such a big deal to Paul? It's such a small, minor manner in some ways."

It reminds me of the Puritans. The Puritans, their big trouble with the English prayer book and the Church of England - this was in 17th century England - were really some seemingly minor issues. They were concerned about a wedding ring. It seems strange to us but you remember a wedding was a sacrament in the Catholic Church and so they were against a wedding ring and engaging in that practice. They were against kneeling at the Lord's Supper and they were against the surplice, which was like a robe for the clergy. And they were also against the mark of the cross, making the mark of the cross at baptism. We kind of hear those things and we don't think that they would be that big of a deal in our context. We wouldn't put up much of a fight against those things. And yet the Puritans were willing to risk their jobs, their careers, their livelihood. They were even willing to risk their lives for the sake of making the Gospel the central thing, making the Gospel the main thing and not adding any external ordinances or manmade rights to detract from Christ's glory, to detract from the means by which God uses to grow Christians and to build His church. They were that concerned about it.

### **"Christianity and...." = Bondage**

It's hard for us to understand. My sense is that if we heard some words like Paul being spoken we might hear more complaints about the kind of words he uses than about if someone came in and starting adding something to the Gospel. We're so desensitized in a lot of ways and we're used to such political correctness that we need to kind of reconfigure ourselves and to look out for false teaching. Don't think that it can't happen here. I think the most controversial thing that's happened in this church and since I've been here was a matter of "Christianity and" - adding something to the Gospel. And we need to be on the lookout for that and be serious about its impact. False teaching leads to bondage.

Then Paul says in verse 13, he says, "you are called to freedom." We're not called to bondage; we're called to freedom and that freedom is a freedom to love. And at its root, the issue of circumcision and the problem was that it was divisive. You have these false teachers coming in and they were teaching circumcision so as to establish two different churches, destroying the unity of the body of Christ, breaking up the church, destroying community, tarnishing the beauty and the glory of the Gospel. They wanted to hold to circumcision so that you would have a church for the Gentiles and a church for the Jews. It was breaking up the church, and that's why Paul is so concerned with it. He says that actually we have a freedom, a freedom against competition and a freedom against self-

promotion. We have a freedom to love one another, to seek the good and the welfare of each other with the same concern and the same efforts that we would seek the good and the welfare of ourselves. It's the freedom to serve one another. It's really a striking thing.

### **Freed from the Law to Fulfill the Law**

If you look there again, he says that to use this freedom through love to serve one another in verse 13. Phil Ryken says that, he comments on this verse, "By setting us free to serve the Holy Spirit enslaves us to one another in love." You see, there's a paradox there. We've been set free by the Gospel, we've been set free by Christ's work, so we don't have to add anything else to it but it actually enslaves us to one another in love so that we can give up our rights and give up our privileges and engage in mundane tasks and endure with people, be patient with people, and love them in small minor ways that may seem insignificant and unrecognized. But that's the freedom that we have to love one another. And he says that we actually fulfill the Law - "for the whole Law is actually fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It completely reorients our relationship to the Law. No longer does the Law make us righteous or declare us righteous but now, because we've been set free, we can use the Law as a guide in sanctification in leading us in how God calls us to love one another and how He calls us to love Himself. And to live out our faith in the world is through the Law but it is no longer dependent on that for our justification but it is for our sanctification.

### **III. Unity and the Spirit**

Which leads to the last thing, verses 15 to 25. We'll cover that quickly. This is the unity and the Spirit. If you look back at verse 5 he says, "For through the Spirit by faith we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." Paul's kind of unpacking that. He's spelling that out a little further saying what that means to live through the Spirit by faith. He's saying that the Christian life is led by the Spirit, it's empowered by the Spirit, and not by the works of the flesh. These two things could not be in greater antithesis to one another; they are completely opposed to each other. The works of the flesh, which is our sinful nature, our fallen nature, versus the work of the Spirit. They couldn't be more opposed to one another. You see it in that list there in the works of the flesh - sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, and so on. And then he goes on to the works of the Spirit, verse 22, that we know and are so familiar with - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. You see how opposed they are to one another. They can't be rectified. We either live through the flesh or we live by the Spirit. One of them is destructive and devastating and one of them builds us up and grows Christians in godliness and builds the church to the glory of God. The Spirit produces the fruits of righteousness and binds the church together.

## **Life in the Spirit and the Means of Grace: The Ordinary, “Mundane” Christian**

And it's a reminder to us to be faithful, that we live life by the Spirit. In some ways there's, like I said, it's a quiet, behind the scenes kind of way of living. It's a call to be faithful in the means of grace - in the Word and in prayer and in the sacraments; being together in fellowship. To be faithful in those things. It's simple. It's not incredible in the way it looks. It doesn't look impressive like the world would see something as impressive. But it's the way God uses to build the church and to grow us in godliness, to make us look more like Christ so that we produce these characteristics in our lives. And as we're faithful in those things it gives us great freedom. You know I think a lot of times we come to certain aspects of our life, maybe it's marriage, maybe it's parenting, it could be even in suffering or in church growth, and we want to add something else to it. We know we have the Bible and we know we have the means of grace but we want to have a separate manual, a handbook, or a new technique - the latest fad in church growth or the latest parenting technique. And we want to add those things to what God gives us as the means of grace to produce fruit by the Spirit. And Paul's saying, "Don't be distracted by those things. Don't be distracted by false teachings and extra requirements to the Gospel, to faith in Christ, but continue to be faithful, to walk, one step at a time, day after day."

And that's the way God grows Christians. That's the way He builds the church. There's a great freedom in that. You know, you look around and you see those who are kind of obviously lost. You look on celebrities in the media and those kind of things and they're constantly looking for the newest thing, some sort of spiritual technique or fad or whatever it may be, and it's rigorous; it's bondage. It's obvious bondage. There's no freedom; there's no joy. There's no love in those things. And what Paul is saying is, walk in the Spirit, be faithful in the means of grace that God has given to us and don't be discouraged when we don't see immediate results. The Spirit will work and He will produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control. Those are the things that we need to glorify God. Those are the things that we need to bind the church together, to grow the church and to build it and to bring God glory and to bring honor and fame to Jesus' name.

Let's pray.

*Father, we do thank You for how You work with Your Spirit. We thank You for the great gift that He is to us, Lord. We ask that You would use this time even as we pray together to grow us closer to one another, to use these prayers for your people, that the prayers of a righteous man will have mighty power as it is working. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.*



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