

Standing Firm in the Freedom of Christ

Gal 5:1-15

In late spring of 1987, Ronald Reagan's speechwriter, Peter Robinson, flew to Berlin to do research a few weeks before Reagan was to give his speech there. One evening at a dinner party, he spoke with Berlin's American diplomat who warned Robinson not to make any mention of the Berlin wall in Reagan's speech. He informed Robinson that Berliners had gotten used to the wall being there and to mention it would make Reagan sound like an anti-communist cowboy.

Later that evening Robinson excused himself from the party and went out to the streets to talk to some of the people of West Berlin. He told them what he had heard – that they had all gotten used to it – and then he asked them for their thoughts. There was a silence that lasted so long Robinson began to think he had committed a major gaffe by bringing it up. But after a long period of time one man spoke up and told how his sister lived just a few kilometers away but he hadn't seen her in over 20 years. *How do you get used to that?* he asked. One by one the West Berliners spoke up, sharing stories of heartbreak, hardship and anger over the separation created by that wall.

Hearing these stories, Robinson wrote the line into Reagan's speech that has since become one of the most famous and powerful lines a president has ever spoken: *Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.* Reagan loved the line but the State Dept. and National Security Council kept fighting it – every time they would go over the speech they would take the line out and every time Reagan would put it back in. He kept it in and many believe that the president's clear challenge to the communists was partly responsible for the wall coming down two years later.

Jesus came to tear down the wall that separated us from God, and set us free from the bondage that sin and alienation from God brought. Eph. 2:11-16 says:

[11] Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—[12] remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15] by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:11-16)

As we come to Gal. 5, Paul continues the theme of freedom that he began in chapter 4 where he compares those who try to earn God's favor by keeping the law to Abraham's son Ishmael who was born by the slave woman Hagar, and those who trust in Christ to Isaac, born to Abraham and Sarah long after it was possible for them to have a child. Ishmael was born to a slave and represents what man can do without God; Isaac was born to a free woman and represents what only God can do. Paul draws the comparison to make clear that those who try to earn God's acceptance and favor by their own efforts at keeping the law are in bondage, but those who trust in Christ have been set free from that bondage.

Then in chapter 5, Paul tells us why Jesus set us free. Actually at first it seems like an oddly circular statement: *For freedom Christ has set us free.* But it just means this: Jesus set us free so that we could live free. His agenda in setting us free was so we could enjoy freedom. But freedom needs to be

protected and there are two warnings in this passage: *don't lose your freedom, and don't abuse your freedom!*

I. *Don't lose your freedom (Gal. 5:1-12)*

In verse one Paul warns the Galatians not to go back to slavery, not to rebuild the wall that Christ tore down. You wouldn't think that those who once lived under the oppression of bondage and then experienced freedom would ever want to return to that bondage again, but legalism has a way of looking attractive when it's packaged just right. It was interesting to me to learn that the East German government named the wall the *Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart*. That makes it sound so good: it isn't a wall to keep people in; it's a wall to keep the horrible fascists out. In fact, it's not a wall at all, it's a rampart built to protect the citizens of E. Berlin. They tried to make a terrible thing seem like a good thing by slapping a nice-sounding name on it.

Legalism rebrands slavery as a means of protecting us. The Judaizers pointed out very real problems within the Galatian churches – problems like division and gossip and anger and lust - and said, the way to protect yourselves from these things is to make keeping the law a necessary part of your salvation.

On Long Island I had some friends who pastored a nearby church, and they were really good guys, but in their zeal I think they sometimes bordered on the legalistic in their practices. I remember once talking to them about a specific policy they had that was extremely strong, in my opinion going beyond scripture, and that policy was now hurting a man who had been in the church for many years and had served humbly and selflessly, and he was put in the position of either accepting their rigid practice and go against what he felt the Lord was calling him to do or leave the church. He left the church – and to his credit he left without anger or resentment, but it was sad for him and many others. I asked the pastors and I remember one of them telling me that it was safer to draw lines that went further than the Bible than to accidentally transgress a biblical command.

I don't think it is safer. Their good intention was to avoid getting close to license by instituting protective barriers that went beyond scripture. Kinda like building an *Anti-Sinfulness Protection Rampart*. But zeal to be holy is not safe if it leads us into legalism. Legalism – at least the kind the Judaizers were bringing – didn't deny Jesus, it helped him. It didn't take away his work on the cross, it added to it. The Judaizers would have professed a deep trust in Jesus but felt more was needed. Paul makes it crystal clear though, when you add to Jesus' work, you lose Jesus' work. As one commentator put it, *A Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted*. We are saved by Christ's work alone. To add anything of our performance to his saving work is to lose his saving work.

So how do we purge the church and our lives of all the crud like anger and lust and gossip and divisions? Verse 5 tells us it's not by building a law-based anti-sinfulness protection rampart, but by the Spirit of God working in us by faith. This is a whole different approach to holiness – and Paul is going to expound on it more in the second half of chapter 5, but our pursuit of holiness isn't through keeping external rules in our flesh, but by the power of the Spirit of God working in us *by faith*. Now verse 5 describes a paradox truth about Christ's work: it is finished, but it isn't consummated yet. That biblical truth is often called *the now and the not yet* – we are righteous in Christ now, but we are also growing in experiential righteousness and we are also waiting for the righteousness to be fully revealed on that last day. We have it now, and we wait in hope for it. But at every point it's a righteousness based on the Holy Spirit and our faith, not a righteousness based on our flesh and the law.

So I think what verse 6 says is that all the stuff that people make a big deal out of isn't a big deal at all. Paul says, *neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything*...in other words, he's not against circumcision – we see that in Acts 16 when Paul has Timothy (who had a Jewish mother) circumcised. Paul's against *trusting* in circumcision to save us. This is how we should see all the things that can lead to legalism but don't necessarily have to. Someone might have a conviction or even a preference not to watch movies of any sort, or listen to any music with a rock beat, or drink alcohol, or dress a certain way, or use a certain Bible translation, or whatever it might be. What Paul is saying is, it's not a problem, it's not a big deal either way, unless someone insists that keeping that conviction is necessary in order to be a Christian. Then it's a problem.

True faith will express itself by producing love. We aren't saved by love, we are saved by faith, but saving faith will necessarily produce love in us. Faith is the root, love is the fruit. And ultimately, what's important? That we keep a lot of rules to make us holy? Show me a church that's heavy on keeping rules and I'll show you a church that's light on love. God gives us the Holy Spirit so that our faith is actively working in the church to produce a spirit of love – and that love bears witness to the Spirit of Jesus present among his people. We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Paul cautions us: guard your freedom. Don't allow your freedom to be stolen from you. And Paul gets pretty worked up about it when he says, I wish those who want you circumcised would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! Now some scholars try to explain this as some deeply spiritual analogy, but I think he meant exactly what he said! There's a time to get righteously angry, and when someone is leading someone else away from Christ and to condemnation that's a good time to get angry.

II. Don't abuse your freedom (vv. 13-15)

We are to guard our freedom, but we are not to abuse that freedom by seeing it as an opportunity for the flesh. The flesh is equally at work in legalism and licentiousness (doing whatever you want) and if we think of freedom as being able to do whatever we want then we will end up in a different kind of captivity.

With freedom comes responsibility, and the believer's responsibility is to serve others out of love. That's what the freedom Jesus purchased for us is to be used for. I am free to love you enough to serve you, rather than love myself so much that I just serve myself.

It is interesting that in a letter that is taking aim against trying to achieve salvation by keeping the law, Paul mentions the second great commandment as fulfilling the entire law. How is it that *you shall love your neighbor as yourself* can fulfill the whole law when he has left out the first and greatest commandment, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul. Remember in verse 6 when Paul says the only thing that counts is faith working through love. A genuine, saving faith in God will inevitably lead to a love for God, but how it expresses itself outwardly is by keeping the second commandment – to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The second commandment fulfills the law because we couldn't ever really keep the second commandment if we weren't keeping the first commandment. And neither of these two great commandments are based on rules to be kept, but on faith working through love by the Spirit. Not do's and don'ts, but the dynamic of love working in us.

This has major implications: it means that one of the most important characteristics of a Christ-centered church is that there is love. There is an atmosphere, an aroma, of love for one another within the church, and for those outside the church too (because our neighbor is whoever we might come across in life).

Verse 15 reveals for the first time that the Galatian believers had a serious problem of division and gossip and backbiting in their churches. The image is of a pack of wild animals snapping at each other,

and eventually devouring each other. Paul warns them and us, when we use our freedom in Christ as an opportunity for the flesh, death, not life, will be the result.

Several months ago I was at a pastor's meeting and one of the regular pastors announced he was resigning his position and taking a pastorate in another state. He wasn't bitter, but I could tell he was sad, and I learned that at a church meeting a year prior to his resignation, they had called a church meeting to discuss as a congregation a significant decision that lay before the church. But that isn't what happened. What happened is that, one person after another got up and criticized the pastor publicly for one thing after another. There was a line of people waiting for their chance to get to the mic to blast into the faults of the pastor.

He stayed in that church another year, but his wife and children left that church that very day and began attending another church for that year, where they received love and healing. Wow. How can believers, who claim to know the love of Christ in their hearts, be so cruel? Why is it that some churches can be the most dangerous places to be in regards to being torn down and criticized and gossiped against? If this were an extremely rare occurrence it wouldn't be so alarming, but there are many churches where this person won't talk to that person and schisms split congregations. And pastor's aren't exempt either. Sometimes pastor's can become bitter towards their congregations and only see the bad. Whole sermons are preached out of frustration and anger, sermons whose aim is to take shots at individuals in the church, rather than feed the flock. Paul gives a sober warning. If you sow this, you will reap this. If you bite, you will be bitten. If you devour, you will be devoured. When this becomes the climate of a church, it will consume itself.

The antidote is that we love one another, and always seek to be growing in our love for one another. That doesn't mean we turn a blind eye to problems or issues that need to be addressed, but we approach even the worst problems with a heart to redeem and love, not tear down and destroy. And so I want to end this message with a two pronged application for GCC related to this subject.

1. *Thanksgiving* – I am very thankful that, to the best of my knowledge, that is not going on here at GCC. There really is a sense of love and respect for one another that permeates this place, and it is something for which I am regularly thankful to God. I think that it reflects your desire to know and love the Lord in sincerity of heart – which leads to a gracious and loving attitude towards others. I have talked to pastors who have talked about the contention and knit-picking going on in their churches as if it is a common thing, and I walk away thinking, I really don't relate to what their describing. I am very thankful for that and very thankful for each of you. Often when Janice and I are talking about individuals or families in this church, we can't help but say what a blessing this person is, or that family is. So when I got to this passage, the primary emotion I felt is thankfulness to God.
2. But a lesser emotion that I feel, but needs to be expressed, is a caution: we are all sinners and we could go there. We need to guard our freedom by guarding our love for one another. We should be free to disagree with one another. At times we will need to lovingly and gently confront one another when there's a sin or issue that needs to be addressed. But, church, let's be careful not to allow ourselves to devolve into backbiting and gossip and division. Let's sow unity, not division. Let's sow encouragement, not criticism. Let's sow humility, not self-righteousness. Apart from Christ and our vigilant guarding of our love, we could turn on each other in a moment and consume one another in self-righteous, judgmental, harsh in-fighting. May that never happen.

There's a commercial that's been running in one form or another since I was a little boy, it's the Smokey the Bear commercials and I remember as a little boy hearing this deep voiced bear say, *Only you can prevent forest fires*. Only you, only I can prevent the fires of division and gossip and self-righteousness that can destroy a church.

Jesus came to set us free from our bondage – he came to tear down the wall so we can live as free men and women in the light of the kingdom of God. Let's be careful not to lose that freedom, or abuse that freedom, but use that freedom to glorify the Lord, build his church, and love His people.