

July 22, 2007

“Standing Firm” Galatians 5:1-12

FCF: The danger of lapsing back into a works-righteousness

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because Christ has set us free for freedom,
(magnet) we must stand firm and not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

The danger of sliding back is real. In the film “The Matrix,” computers keep man in bondage by plugging wires into the mind, creating a false reality. People think they are free, but they are actually entombed in little pods where the computers feed off their energy. A few have escaped and battle the machines, but life is hard in the real world. Some even go back. One, Reagan, makes a deal. “*Ignorance is bliss,*” he tells the Matrix agent. “*I don’t want to remember nothing. Nothing! You understand? And I want to be rich. You know, someone important – like an actor.*” “*Whatever you want, Mr. Reagan.*”

The point? The appeal to go back is always there – back to how it was, back to the old, the familiar, the enslaving. And it’s not just the stuff of science fiction. It’s very real, very potent, and very dangerous. And the Bible addresses it in a very real way.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 5:1-12

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Historical revisionism is easy to slip into – a recasting of the facts of the past into a more convenient, easier but not necessarily better, way of remembering. We see it in museums, textbooks, and documentaries. And in ourselves. We see it even in the record of the Old Testament – after the exodus from Egypt, as the Israelites stood on the verge of entering the land of Canaan. The report of the spies did not settle well (**READ Numbers 14:2-4**). Go back to Egypt? To sweat and toil, to slavery and bondage, to a meager existence and social despicement? Go back to Egypt? Had they lost their minds?

In a way, yes. So had the Galatians. And to a degree, so have each of us – failing to remember, to understand, to appreciate what Jesus has delivered us from and to (**READ Galatians 5:1**). Christ had set them free. Their former state was spiritual slavery. Jesus was their liberator. Their conversion an emancipation. Life in Christ to be a life of freedom. Freedom from and freedom to – freedom of conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, freedom from the dreadful struggle to keep the law so as to win the favor of God. Freedom to acceptance with God and freedom to access to God through Christ. “*This is who you are. This is what He has done for you,*” Paul says. “*I know the pull is strong. Just as for any addict or ex-con. I know what it’s like. I’ve been there. But I’ve met Jesus. And so have you. So stand firm. Don’t give in. Don’t cave in. Christ has set you free for freedom. So stand firm.*” Such is the appeal of verse 1.

In the verses that follow, Paul unpacks this for us in ways that help us to see how we are to take this stand, to persist, to persevere in the gospel, resisting the pull upon us.

I. SEEING THE FOLLY

And it begins with seeing the folly of this other way (**READ Galatians 5:2-4**).

A) Jesus Does Us No Good

Paul says that to “*accept circumcision*” means that Jesus will do us no good. Now circumcision in this context was more than a surgical procedure. It was a theological statement. “*I am loved by, accepted by, right with God because I’ve obeyed the rules.*”

1. What he says

Paul says Christ then is of “no advantage” or value – useless. Why? We don’t need Him.

2. Why it's important

Christ provides unlimited help to those who trust in Him. But to those who trust in themselves, as far as salvation is concerned, He provides no help at all. That's verse 2.

B) *We Become Eternal Debtors*

In verse 3, Paul goes further and says through the law we become eternal debtors.

1. What he says

God is not satisfied with a token fulfillment of His law. If we go this route, saying we have to measure up to any part of the law, it means we have to measure up to it all.

2. Why it's important

But none of us can do that. Only Christ Himself. Which means that, if we want to be justified, made right with God, by the law, we'll be in for more than we bargained for.

C) *We Are Cut Off*

Which takes us to verse 4. We are then severed from Christ.

1. What he says

Estranged, alienated, cut off. A powerful image that should shake us to the core.

2. Why it's important

The Lord is saying that in coming to Him, it's one way or the other. Either by law or by grace, either by works or by faith. It's one of two ways so we need to make up our mind.

But as we do, Paul is also making it clear we cannot improve on Christ's work for us with ours for Him. We cannot improve on Christ's work for us with ours for Him.

Illustration:

And to try is desperately arrogant. Think of a masterpiece in the art realm – Monet's "Water Lilies." Imagine the museum curator giving it to you on loan. And so you take it home. But you feel like there're some places you could touch up a bit. So you get your little brush and your little green crayon and put some pollywogs in the pond and some frogs on the lily-pads. And you sit back and admire your work. What do you think the museum officials will say? "*What have you done? You've ruined it!*"

Application:

Well, dare we look at the cross – the Son of God nailed there for us – and stand before God's labor of love and salvation, His masterpiece, with our little brush and our little crayon, wanting to touch it up? Listen. You don't have the eye, the skill, the training. And look what you've done. You can see where you've cheapened His work by adding to it. And where you can't see it, ask Him and He'll show you. Put your brush and your crayon away. Christ has set you free. Stand firm. Don't let yourself be yoked.

II. TREASURING OUR HOPE

If we've to take this stand, we need to see the folly of going the other way. The next thing Paul shows is the need to treasure our hope in the gospel (**READ Galatians 5:5-6**). Now understand that "hope" as defined in the Bible is not wishing upon a star. It's knowing. It's looking forward with expectation – sure not of ourselves but of God.

A) *Wondrous Certainty*

And what Paul is saying here is the gospel of salvation "by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" gives us a wondrous certainty. There's a future element here.

1. What it is

"Hope of righteousness" points to Christ's return. All will be made right – including us.

2. How it could be

And note the posture of this hoping – expectantly waiting. Not a working but a waiting.

B) *Genuine Fellowship*

Such is the future element. There is a wondrous certainty because of who will bring it about. But there is a present element as well – genuine fellowship.

1. The basis

In Christ Jesus, by the way of the gospel, “*neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.*” Meaning such things, such practices, do not matter. There is nothing you or I can add. Which has a way of leveling the ground we stand on together.

2. The enablement

Which then overflows – “*faith working through love.*” The gospel secures our hope, brings us together, and then enables and empowers us to love one another.

The point being: Would you trade all that for this? Don’t you see what you lose?

Illustration:

Now children do this sort of thing all the time. I can remember when I was young how my older cousins and I would compare the coins in our pockets and they would say, “*Now look. This one here is a nickel. And this one here is a penny. They’re bigger than that dime you have, right? So they must be worth more.*” And I’d get suckered in – trading the thing of more value for the thing of less. The stakes are a bit higher here.

Application:

Listen. To the extent you slide back into self-justification, this self-righteousness, you are trading it all in. Not losing your salvation, if you’re a believer in Christ, but certainly your enjoyment of it. The joy of your hope – looking forward to His return and your days being shaped by the sure certainty of what will come. And your love of others as well. To trust in Christ’s sacrifice for you completely is to be freed to sacrifice for others in the same way. But if you do not know that love, if you are not holding to it as the treasure it is, how will you then be able to extend such love to others? Listen. Christ has set you free. Stand firm. Stand firm. Don’t give in again to the yoke of slavery.

III. FACING THE STRUGGLE

Which takes us to the last thing Paul holds out for us to remember – to face the struggle (**READ Galatians 5:7-12**). The struggle is real and needs to be taken seriously.

A) *Where It Comes From*

First, keeping in mind where it comes from. Look at verses 7-8.

1. Not divine origins

“*Not from Him who calls you*” – not from God who calls us by His grace.

2. But demonic

No, this legalism is anything but divine. Ultimately, it is demonic. Again, if we are Christ’s, numbered among the Shepherd’s fold, Satan cannot steal us away. But he can rob us of our joy. He is, after all, the Accuser – a master of getting us to look at ourselves and our sins instead of Christ and His righteousness. Remember where this comes from.

B) *What It Does*

And know what it does. Look at verse 9. Paul uses a common proverb here.

1. Spreading

Leaven spreads through dough. That’s what it’s meant to do – to work its way through.

2. Contaminating

But the leaven of legalism spreads contamination – ruining the whole lump.

C) *Where It Will Lead*

And where will all this lead? The Lord’s intervention (**READ Galatians 5:10-12**).

1. Recovering His own

Paul knows with confidence that the risen ruling Lord of the church will recover His own.

2. Judging the troublemakers

And that He will come to judge those making trouble for His own as well – if not now, certainly later. This is where these strong words we see in verse 12 come into play. They have made a false charge against Paul. But there is a true charge coming against them.

Again, the struggle is real and needs to be taken seriously.

Illustration:

Denial is okay in some things. But not here. An old story tells of a desert nomad who awakened hungry in the middle of the night. He lit a candle and began eating dates from a bowl beside his bed. He took a bite from one end and saw a worm in it, so he threw it out of the tent. He bit into the second date, found another worm, and threw it away also. Reasoning that he wouldn't have any more dates left to eat if he continued, he blew out the candle and quickly ate all the dates. That's okay with dates. Not here.

Application:

The reality of the worms in the dates, the leaven in the lump, needs to be faced – where it comes from, what it does, and where it will lead. We need to face the reality and remember who is Lord. Which means we need not be discouraged. Instead, we can be optimistic that brothers or sisters in the faith struggling with their faith will come around. It means we need not be dismayed at the unbelief in many churches, the spread of cults, the rise of false religions. For Jesus is Lord. We need to face the reality of the struggle yet be assured of who has, is, and will win. Know that the gospel is enough. And stand.

CONCLUSION:

Now, my guess is that none of us are struggling with the issue of circumcision as a way to get right with God. But that's not to say we're immune from the struggle. Martin Luther began his education in law. Eventually, Luther shifted over to studies of theology. Stricken in his conscience, longing for some spiritual solace, he threw himself into the monastic life and into confession – wearing out his confessors. He began to read the Scriptures – Romans, in particular. In the midst of this, he had the opportunity to go to Rome. A pilgrimage to Rome! “*Surely that will do it,*” thought Luther. And so he went. He went to the Lateran Church – the place of the “holy stairs,” supposedly the stairs that led up to Pilate's house, complete with the blood of Jesus dripped upon them. It was said if you dragged yourself up those stairs, you could erase years of purgatory for yourself and loved ones – nine years for each twenty-eight steps. And so Luther did. And then the words he had been wrestling with so long came upon him (**READ Romans 1:16-17**) Just as in Galatians – “by faith” and by faith alone. And with that, Luther stood up. He stood up and walked down those steps and left all that vain foolishness behind.

Let me ask you. What “stairs” are you climbing? Hear me. This is for us all – the mistaken unbeliever and the forgetting believer. What “stairs” are you climbing? Reading your Bible, praying diligently, sharing the gospel. Serving on committees, in community efforts. Trying to be a better spouse or parent – more patient, kind, listening and speaking with care. Giving sacrificially – your energy, time, and money. Coming on a Sunday morning, perhaps bringing family or a friend in tow. I'm glad you are. But have you made all that into stairs to climb? Have you submitted to a yoke of slavery? My fellow Galatians, Christ has set you free. Free. It's time to stand up. And stand firm.

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