

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A Study of Galatians: Practical Christianity - Galatians 5:1-26

Today we continue with our studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians. We are looking at Galatians 5 under the heading "Practical Christianity". A young man was invited to preach a trial sermon at a church with a view to serving there. After he had finished, he asked, "Will it do?" The question quickly was thrown back at him, "What will it do?" It is important to realise that Christianity is much more than a head knowledge of the Lord Jesus as Saviour, but has to do with the kind of life that is consistent with that knowledge - believing and behaving.

The Christians in Galatia had begun so well. Through the Gospel which Paul brought to them, they had responded to the grace of Christ (Galatians 1:6). That grace, that totally undeserved favour of God, had been supremely set forth in the cross of Christ, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Through faith in Christ alone, they had come to experience God's salvation, the forgiveness of their sins.

But then some other false teachers had come along and insisted that though for salvation it was necessary to believe that Christ died for our sins, it was also necessary to keep God's Law, the commandments given to Moses by God. As part of that law-keeping, it was still necessary for all believing males to be circumcised. That serious error draws forth from the Apostle Paul both the strongest condemnation and the tenderest affection.

So in Galatians 1, Paul writes, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:6-9). Strong words indeed! Yet that solemn warning is still necessary today lest any be fooled into thinking that there is anything that they can do for their salvation in addition to the work of Christ on the cross of Calvary.

But in his concern for them and for their restoration to that simplicity of faith in Christ alone for salvation, Paul addresses them in some of the tenderest language to be found in any of his writings: "My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). Would to God that I could speak to you today with anything like that kind of affection!

So in our chapter today, Paul writes, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (Galatians 5:6-7).

But while it is important to insist that for my salvation there is absolutely nothing that I can add to the work of Christ on the cross, it is also important to insist that, having trusted Christ as my Saviour, the way I live my life now, that is the works that I do, needs to be seen to be consistent with that salvation. This is not in any way to earn that salvation but rather as the expression of that new life that I received upon trusting Christ as my Saviour. The little rhyme puts it well:

*I will not work my soul to save;
That work my Lord has done.
But I will work like any slave
For love of God's dear Son.*

It is significant that many of Paul's epistles fall into two sections: first, the doctrinal part setting forth a particular truth of God's salvation; second, the kind of life that ought to be lived as a practical expression of that truth. In this letter to the Galatians, Galatians 1-4 set forth the truth of God's salvation quite apart from the Law; Galatians 5 and 6 then deal more particularly with the kind of life that ought to be shown by the Galatian believers and by us today.

So to look at the details of Galatians 5. It falls conveniently into two sections, each introduced by an appeal of the Apostle:

1. Galatians 5:1-15 Stand fast
2. Galatians 5:16-26 Walk in the Spirit.

Stand fast

Paul writes in Galatians 5:1: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage". The great message of the Gospel is that it sets men and women free - free from the bondage of sin and free to be the kind of men and women God wants us to be! That message is particularly developed by Paul in his letter to the Romans. So in Romans 6:22-23 he writes, "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord". The Lord Jesus Himself said, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Paul summarises the Gospel he preached in this way, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Paul's great desire in all his writings was that believers would stand fast in the truths of the Gospel which he had preached to them. This appeal to "stand fast" occurs no fewer than six times in his writings (see 1 Corinthians 16:13; Philippians 1:27, 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:15) and in Galatians 5:1.

Today, in a climate of constantly changing opinions and standards, we very much need to hear this appeal, "Stand fast". We need to stand fast in the truth of the Gospel that salvation is by faith alone in the finished work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. There is absolutely nothing that I need to, or can, add to that work to make me right with God! So the Galatian believers were totally wrong in thinking that by their keeping of the Law insisting on circumcision they could in any way add to their salvation. So in Galatians 5:6, he writes to them, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love".

Walk in the Spirit

Paul writes in Galatians 5:16, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh". Although the Gospel writers use the word 'walk' as we commonly use it, i.e. to describe the way in which we move on our legs, Paul never uses it in this way. Consistently he uses it to describe the whole way of life. As we shall see later, he uses a different Greek word in Galatians 5:25. Here in Galatians 5:16, he uses it to describe the life of each individual believer.

Is it possible to live for Christ in a world that is so opposed to Him? Paul makes clear that there is a battle going on in each individual believer: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Galatians 5:17). Here Paul uses 'the flesh' to describe that old nature which we had from the day we were born. Left to ourselves, we could never win this battle. But Paul's command is "walk in the Spirit". The moment we trusted Christ as our Saviour, we received not only the forgiveness of our sins and God's free gift of eternal life, but also the gift of His indwelling Holy Spirit. Never let us lose sight of this amazing fact! That same Holy Spirit who indwelt the Lord Jesus indwells each one of us too. He is the power to enable us to live for Christ. It is striking that in this short letter, there are no fewer than fifteen references to the Holy Spirit, and eight of them are in Galatians 5. He is the great theme of this chapter.

I want to read to you now Galatians 5:18-23: "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like: of which I tell you beforehand, just as I told you in time past, that those who practise such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law."

The terrible truth of those 'works of the flesh' is evidenced daily in our more sensational newspapers. But lest some of us throw up hands in holy horror and exclaim, "But I am not like those bad people", let us just reflect on those words, "jealousies ... selfish ambitions ... envy". We are all guilty. We should just note in passing that when Paul writes of such as "...will not inherit the kingdom of God", he is not speaking of those who fall into occasional sin, but rather of "those who practise such things", that is, of those whose lifetime practice is made up of such things.

Have you ever walked past a building site? The pile drivers are banging, the hammers are clanging, and the saws are buzzing. What a terrible noise! Man is at work! Perhaps like me, you rush past seeking for quietness. That's the kind of picture that is described in Galatians 5:19-21.

But have you ever walked through an orchard on a summer's day? Apart from the buzzing of the bees, all is quiet. You might think nothing's happening. Not a bit of it! The fruit is swelling on the trees, getting ready for harvest. God is at work in His creation! That's what I think of when I read this description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. We need to spend some time thinking about these important verses.

The first thing to notice is that they provide a very apt summary of the life of the Lord Jesus Himself. That is not too surprising when we recall that John the Baptist said of the Lord Jesus, "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure" (John 3:34). The whole life of the Lord Jesus was lived under the direction of, and in the power of, the Holy Spirit. Take time just to reflect on what the Gospels say about Him and see how accurately Galatians 5:22-23 describe Him. Here are some suggestions to set you thinking.

Love: His love was shown supremely at the cross of Calvary where He laid down His life for us (John 13:1; Romans 5:7-8).

Joy: While the Lord Jesus is described as a "Man of sorrows" (Isaiah 53:3), He was sustained in His inner life by a deep joy which He sought to pass on to His followers (John 17:13; Hebrews 12:2).

Peace: On one occasion, the Lord Jesus was with His disciples on a boat in Lake Galilee. When a sudden storm threatened to capsize their ship and His disciples were terrified for their lives, Jesus was asleep in the boat (Mark 4:38).

Longsuffering: How many times had Jesus looked over Jerusalem and longed that its inhabitants would receive Him. Listen to His deeply moving lament over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37).

Kindness: When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, one of His disciples impetuously drew his sword and cut off the ear of one of the servants. In His kindness, the Lord Jesus restored that ear (Luke 22:50-51).

Goodness: A young man, coming to Jesus, felt he had to address Him, "Good Teacher" (Mark 10:17). Peter summarised the life of the Lord Jesus in these words, "Jesus of Nazareth ... went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38).

Faithfulness: In a world characterised by disobedience to God, the Lord Jesus was uniquely faithful. So at the end of His life, He could say to His Father, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

Gentleness: When His disciples would have prevented children coming to Him, the Lord Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me". Then we read, "He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:13-16). Those little children were instinctively at home in His gentle embrace.

Self-control: Nowhere was that self-control more clearly seen than when the Lord Jesus was on trial for His life before Caiaphas, the High Priest. He had to endure listening to the lies with which paid false witnesses charged Him. Then we read, "And the high priest arose and said to Him, 'Do You answer nothing? What is it that these men witness against You?' But Jesus kept silent" (Matthew 26:62-63).

The fruit of the Spirit, then, was perfectly seen in the Lord Jesus. But God wants to see that same fruit in us, too, so that He might have something of that same delight that He found in Him in us also. That may seem a very tall order, but let us remember that the same Holy Spirit who indwelt the Lord Jesus indwells us too. Peter reminds us, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Before we leave this subject, we should just notice that it is fruit, in the singular, and not fruits. It just will not do to say that I can manage the love bit, but not the self-control bit. God wants to see all of this nine-fold fruit of the Spirit in us!

Finally, Paul writes, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the same Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). As we noted earlier, Paul uses a different Greek word for 'walk' here. It might be better translated, "Let us keep in step with the Spirit". Perhaps you have watched the army marching on Horse Guards Parade for the Queen's birthday. It's amazing to see first those left legs and then the right legs being raised in perfect unison. That only comes about after considerable practice!

So in Galatians 5:25, the emphasis is much more on the collective behaviour of these Galatian believers. As each one listened to, and acted upon, the promptings of the Holy Spirit within them, so they would find that they would walk

together in unison and some would not be led away by false teachers. In the broken state of the church today, we very much need to learn that same lesson. At another time, Paul was concerned that the believers in Philippi were clearly not walking in step with the Spirit. So he wrote to them, "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfil my joy, by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Philippians 2:1-2). Note those all-important words, 'fellowship of the Spirit'. May the Lord help each one of us to know more of that today!

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