

Is Paul preaching works here? No, rather he is warning that if they persist in walking according to the flesh, it is a sign that they haven't yet truly entered into the salvation that comes through faith alone.

Contrast this, Paul says, with the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - which are the characteristics of those who belong to Christ and who have set aside the corruptions of the flesh.

Paul's message to the Galatians still holds true for each one of us. That is, walk by the Spirit, set aside the things the world, things of the flesh, hold on to faith in Christ alone, and look for no other way to be justified with God, other than the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Next week we see how Paul concludes the letter with a call to obey the law of Christ, and with a final warning against accepting circumcision.



Reflections on Galatians

Galatians 5:1-26

"Faith Working Through Love"

Having established his authority, and appealed to Abraham, to his relationship with the Galatians, and to the law itself, to prove his case, Paul now moves on to address the issue of circumcision in particular.

Paul argues that if a person were to accept circumcision then they would be obliged to obey the whole law, and shows that in Christ whether a person is or is not circumcised does not matter, since the key to the matter is faith working through love.

Paul warns the Galatians not to use their freedom as an opportunity to sin, instead telling them to walk by the Spirit and bear spiritual fruit.

Paul begins with the great proclamation "for freedom Christ has set us free." Freedom from the law, and from the bondage of sin: the freedom that Christians enjoy was won at a terrible cost, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Paul will not allow that price to have been paid for nothing.

Having received so great a freedom, Paul urges the Galatian Christians not to submit to "a yoke of slavery." That is, slavery to the law, to sin and to death.

This is what is at stake, for Paul, in submitting to the call of the circumcision-party to accept circumcision. Paul says "Christ will be of no advantage to you."

By that Paul means, that if the Galatians try to add circumcision to salvation by faith, then they will have to obey the whole law, and since we are told that no one can keep the law perfectly, and that to break one small part of the law is to break it all, then there would be no hope left open for them.

In adopting circumcision the Galatian Christians would be setting aside the grace of God, and by turning once again to the law as a means of justification, would be condemning themselves to God's judgement.

Circumcision is external, it affects the body, and does nothing to the heart - the spirit is unchanged. What Paul is trying to get the Galatians to grasp is that faith is a matter of the spirit, and not of the flesh. He says of himself that "through the spirit" he is waiting "for the hope of righteousness."

Paul states quite clearly that "in Christ Jesus" circumcision is unimportant: circumcised or uncircumcised, it means nothing either way, what matters is faith in Christ, and that faith being expressed through love.

Paul now changes his approach, rather than challenging the Galatians, he commends them for their prior commitment. They were "running well", and "obeying the truth." Paul wonders who has diverted their good intentions. It is not, Paul says, from the Holy Spirit, the "one who calls you," that this wrong teaching has come.

Somehow some small error, some small false teaching has insinuated itself into the Galatian church, and the whole church has been "leavened," as it were, by false teaching.

Paul once again tries to be positive, expressing confidence that the Galatians will come round, and start to see things his way. Paul talks as if there were just a single person causing the trouble, and is also confident that that person will "bear the penalty" for their wilful error.

Paul is frustrated over the Galatian Christians. Perhaps they think that he himself is preaching that Christians should be circumcised. If that were so he responds, "why am I still being persecuted?"

If Paul were preaching observance of the law, then salvation is no longer by faith alone, and cross is no longer offensive, in fact the cross becomes nothing at all.

Again Paul reiterates the call to freedom, and urges the Galatians not to allow that freedom to be used in the cause of sin, not to be, as Paul says, "an opportunity for the flesh" but an opportunity to serve one another in the love of Christ.

Paul has not completely set aside the teaching of the law, it is God's law, but he recognises that the law is also fulfilled in the call to love one another. The law is summarised in the command to "love your neighbour as yourself."

Paul has completed his argument against the Galatians' adopting practices from the law. He has appealed to his own authority, to the experience of the Galatian Christians, to Abraham, to the law itself and to common sense.

Paul now moves on to take the opportunity to offer the Galatians some positive teaching. Urging them to set aside the fleshly concerns of circumcision and the law, Paul tells them "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

In many ways this is the solution to the problem of circumcision. Circumcision is a concern very much of the flesh, and the concerns of the flesh and concerns of the spirit do not sit well together. If the Galatian Christians concern themselves with the things of the Spirit, then issues like circumcision will fall away as being of no consequence.

Paul says again "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

Paul spells out for the Galatians exactly what living according to the flesh will look like, in case they were under any doubts. Paul lists for them: "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these."

Paul warns them that these behaviours are contrary to the life of the Spirit, and that persisting with such behaviours will bar them from God's kingdom.