



GALATIANS

Stand In Freedom | 5:1-12

The problem with a life of religion rather than faith is that religion is stifling. Religion suffocates the free life, as Paul has been arguing throughout his letter.

Now, religion and religious practices are not the same things. We who are free emphasize particular means and methods and modes—habits, exercises, and traditions—that help us grow in the freedom of our relationship with our heavenly Father; mature into who we are created and re-born to be. But religion is not synonymous with a healthy relationship with God—nor self nor neighbor.

Religion operates on the assumption that way we relate to God (and thus others) is transactional, economic, based on a point system that determines our eligibility for the benefits of favor or the implications (judgments and condemnation) of wrath. While faith acknowledges the consequences for our choices and actions, religion assumes conviction, sentencing, reprobation. In relationship via faith, there is room for mystery, grace, mercy, rebuke, and correction, **because the relationship is settled and cannot be undone.** In relationships via religion, there is no wiggle room. A law is a law; a rule is a rule; a+b always equals condemnation. Perhaps that's not a completely accurate picture, but consider most people's experience of trying to relate to God through a religious system; it is unsettling...even troublesome.

That's what Paul says in verse 10, that those promoting a "religious relating" to God rather than a gracious kindred relationship through Jesus, are "troubling" the Galatians. This word means **causing mental and emotional turmoil.** The troubling nature of religious leaders and the systems they promote is why so many people who experience life with God, via the conduit of religion, do so entangled in the emotions of guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, pride, hesitancy, and hypocrisy. If we relate to God through religion, we are "obliged to keep the whole law," and thus are weighed continuously by our actions and attitudes, accidents, and ambivalence, which might tip the scale against us with any off movement.

When we are unwilling to wait eagerly through the Spirit by faith in the (secure) hope for righteousness (right relationship), doing religious things to get from God what God has promised to provide, the things you do ultimately end up being only an ill-fitting yoke that will be ineffective for the life you were made for and, eventually, an embittering oppressor.

The yoke of slavery is burdensome, stifling, ill-fit for our design, and though we may do very similar things to what we would do with Jesus, the yoke of slavery makes such work heavy—an agitation of mind, soul, heart, and strength. Paul is not against religious practices, but are you submitting to practices or submitting to Jesus? That is the issue with the Galatians and tends to be ours even today.

The difference may seem subtle—but a little leaven makes the whole loaf rise. The complicated reality for both the Galatians and you and I is that for a while, we run well, free life in Jesus, a life of faith in love is "easy," it feels loose, natural as if we were made for this life. But then something or someone cuts in our line throws us off course but not out of the race; but now the life of faith is troublesome, weighty, our stride is off—we constantly have to think about every detail and movement, which is exhausting—there is more

resistance than before. Still, maybe if we just follow the person in front of us (ironically the one that caused us to get out of whack with our line in the first place), then we think we'll eventually fall back into step. Yet we never do. We continue to run, not with the troubles of life in a broken world, but with the weight of religion.

None of us desires a way of life in which we are constantly poked and prodded (internally and externally) by masters faining our good as the goal of their running. And yet, if we are honest, most of us experience "Christianity" that way—whether in seasons or as a whole.

I have to confess; I am often troubled by religion—the weight of having to "keep the whole law," and my inconsistencies in being able to do so. Thus I feel "severed from Christ...fallen away from grace," not because of God who calls me into a free life, "This persuasion is not from him," as Paul says in verse 8, but because I have submitted again to the yoke of slavery.

I am not talking about godly, Holy Spirit conviction that is a part of being a child of God. Remember what Jesus said in John's gospel, that the Holy Spirit, the Helper and Spirit of truth (the same "truth," by the way, that the Galatians in verse 7 were obeying in their running well but were now hindered from following) this Holy Spirit will "convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment," (Jn. 16:7-15).

We, like all children, have growing up to do, things to learn, sins that keep us from living maturely and freely in our Created and gifted fullness; and the Spirit of Truth will Help us know what these things are, what is right, and what are the consequences of such actions. But religion hinders us from responding to the Holy Spirit, from being in a relationship with God—the law is detailed, and the consequences unequivocally delineated. Religion replaces relationship, or, at best, becomes a poor imitation of a healthy relationship—like a tutor or guardian substituting for the affections of a parent.

Let me be clear; Paul is not against religious practices. Rather, he understands the limitations of religious practices—"neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything," is the way Paul says it in verse six. In fact, Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews and more Jewish than the Judiazers, is himself circumcised and encouraged his beloved protégé Timothy—whose mother was Jewish—to be circumcised as a way to benefit Timothy's soul and ministry. So Paul is not against "religious things." Paul is not against the things we do as free women and men of faith; **he is against doing things to earn or secure that God-given and gifted freedom**—as if we earn or secure our identity, our inheritance, our standing before God through our own efforts—for in doing so, "Christ will be no advantage to you" (v. 2) because you don't need him to relate to God!

There are no new arguments from Paul in our text today. As I mentioned last week, Paul ends chapter four with an impassioned plea for his friends and family to recognize who they are—heirs of the promise—and thus live into their God-given and gifted identity and all that such an inheritance entails.

Exasperated, Paul exhales chapter 5 verse 1 with a sigh, "For freedom Christ has set us free. So stand firm, and do not give in and return to a yoke of slavery."

You were created to live free, to travel through this world, participate in salvation history unfolding, cultivating a good world, under the easy yoke of Jesus. The harness designed to fit you and bind you to God and which makes life here in this broken but being redeemed world a light burden as Jesus leads you through the fields of home and work and marriage and friends, pandemics, miscarriages of justice, cruelty, evil, and the sadness spilled violence from the overflow of genuine wounds.

The Galatians once experienced this freedom in the way they loved Paul, but now they want to put on themselves a way of life ill fit for the one they were created to live—or let others put it on them because they refuse to think for themselves.

We do not earn or secure our identity, inheritance, purpose, or future; we receive it, and “through the Spirit, by faith” (v. 5), we expectantly wait for the satisfaction (the fullness) of our relationship with the Father. As the Message translation phrases it,

“When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace. Meanwhile, we expectantly wait for a satisfying relationship with the Spirit. For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters most is something far more interior [and personal]: faith [worked out through] love.”

Faith working through love—our faith, God's love—through His Spirit by our faith—relationship!

George MacDonald speaks of the “inexorable love,” of God, the inevitability of God’s love, the impossibility of stopping or preventing God’s love. Inexorable love is the love that gets worked through us and out of us as we live by faith—trusting that God is here, sharing his life with us by His Spirit, putting an end to what enslaves us—hatred and fear that leads to evil, violence, and division, and the will to power that would have us ignore, crush, dismiss, or use others. God’s love consumes all that, his love is a consuming fire, consuming “all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love’s kind...”¹

Love marks true freedom. That will be Paul’s argument for the remainder of the letter before his customary concluding remarks.

What our heavenly Father requires is faith, faith working through love so that the joy of your identity and inheritance might be complete, not full of trouble.

Freedom is not easy like we are used to thinking...not without labor, not without difficulty, not making all of life effortless or without the pangs of sin and brokenness. The love of God will purify us, make us holy as our Father is holy. Nor does freedom remove you from life, but allows you to live life differently. To recognize that “neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything” in this eternal existence; what matters, what is required of us is faith—a life trusting that God is here and sharing his life with by the Spirit. God has made us to be free, God is opposed to all that enslaves (including our own efforts to complete what he started), and God satisfies what we are trying to attain (intimacy, purpose, justice identity, peace, future, etc.).

Paul is not opposed to circumcision or any other spiritual practice per se. But what Paul is opposed to is the trouble of religion. To guilt and shame, pride and comparisons, hesitancy because the scales of our religion

¹ Quoted by C.S. Lewis in *George MacDonald*, 2.

leaves us unsure of the character of God, division in our ranking of sins and insiders and outsiders, the fake it till you make it tendencies of religion and so on.

Love—which requires a relationship, commitment, care, strength, knowledge, mystery, and the like—does not produce such troubles, even if it compels obedience, mutual-submission, and sacrifice. But religion, especially one promoted by those with less than altruistic motives, is offensive to the very heart of love—the act of supreme, unmerited, unselfish, powerful, love—the cross.

Paul ends this section with one of the more infamous quotations in the New Testament. The ESV translation says, “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” The NIV goes a bit further, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” And, the Message still a bit further ‘ Why don’t those agitators, obsessive as they are with circumcision, go all the way and castrate themselves! And finally, there is Luther’s translation that goes even further but is no less faithful to the original language, “Tell those disturbing you I would like to see the knife slip!”

As humorous as Paul’s reaction may sound to our ears—whether it be amusing or offensive in its oddity! —as a Hebrew of Hebrews, there is more to what Paul is saying than what he said.

Paul is saying at least four things about how he feels and desires his brothers and sisters to feel towards those who would spy out their freedom in Jesus, convincing them to “self-commit” again to a yoke of slavery. No matter how devout, knowledgeable, or religious they seem.

- 1) His attitude is severe against agitators, religious troublemakers—so should ours be to those who would have us relate to God through anything other than in the Spirit faith worked out through love.
- 2) Paul desires to see the lineage of the troublemakers end with them—cutting off their ability to reproduce—so should we strive to put an end to any teaching or practice or even followership that would have us relate to God through anything other than in the Spirit faith worked out through love.
- 3) Eunuchs by the law of Moses, were not allowed to enter into the most sacred parts of the Jewish temple. They were limited in their fellowship with the people of God. So Paul here is advocating the removal of the troublemakers from the fellowship of the free in faith—Paul is imploring the Galatians, once again (4:30), to cast out and cast off those leading them to relate to God through anything other than in the Spirit faith worked out through love.
- 4) Lastly, Paul’s stand-out statement implores the recognition that what the religious promoters are doing is no more Godward than the worship of false gods. Familiar to Paul’s readers would be the cult of the goddess Cybele, whose priests were castrated. We are to remember that anything that encourages us to relate to God through anything other than in the Spirit faith worked out through love is nothing more than idol worship, a false religion.

The most dangerous thing to freedom is religious relating, not religious practices, but the relating to your heavenly Father, your Savior brother, and Spirit Helper through religion—the attitude to earning or securing your relationship. Stand firm against any such teaching, persons, personal conviction, defining experience, or emotional/intellectual tug...stand firm in the Spirit faith working through love. It is your choice—choose freedom.

Let's pray

COMMUNION

A life of freedom is a life of love; a life of faith in the love God has for you, faith that his love for you is enough, faith that love in return is all he desires; for if you love him, you will live rightly with him and towards those others whom he loves. How do you live by faith? You love.

Why would you choose to live under the mind games and emotional seesaw of religion rather than in a relationship with the Spirit in faith worked out through love? I doubt you would want to live that way, but if you don't stand up for what is true, in step with the Spirit of Truth, if you don't think for yourself if you don't love for yourself...you'll end up under a greater weight than the one you were freed from in the first place. It doesn't take much—just a little leaven, just a little religious attitude rather than faith through love—to cause such a dramatic and complete reaction.

You are free, so take a stand in that freedom worked out through love faith family. Say no to religion—and how it teaches you to relate to the world, and yes to Jesus—crucified and alive again so that you might inherit all that is his. Free to live by faith working through inexorable—impossible to stop or prevent—love of God that we receive this morning in Jesus' name and live amongst our neighbors and for our city and nation this week...