

Intro:

In our series on Christian living, I have been working away on a few ideas in order to call you to very high standards of Christian living. That is my goal – I think you should have and adopt high standards for your personal life.

We started with a message called ‘Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit’ way back in November. You might not remember that message.

We also had two ‘Violent’ messages: ‘The Violent Christian’ and ‘The Violent Christian in the World’.

Lately, we have had two messages attempting to define Christian liberty. I am somewhat happy with them, but perhaps they were too complicated.

Let me see if I can boil down Christian liberty into its essential components:

1. Christian liberty means that you have been transformed from a position of bondage to sin, law, and death to a position of responsibility as a full citizen of Christ’s kingdom (under the law of Christ).
2. Christian liberty means that you have been enabled and empowered to live the life of Christian victory, overcoming the degrading power of the flesh with its allies the world and the devil.

Now I want to deal with the subject that is Paul’s motivation for writing Galatians:

The first threat to Christian Liberty

The first threat to Christian liberty came from people who professed to be believers in Jesus Christ but, we will find, added particularly pernicious doctrines that ultimately destroy Christian liberty and the gospel itself.

We are going to take as our text the next verses in Gal 5, although this will not be a detailed exposition of all these verses.

Read Gal 5.2-12

Proposition: Any work deemed to be essential to salvation besides faith alone in Christ alone will destroy liberty and the gospel itself.

I. The nature of the threat

A. Revealed by our text: Judaizing (Gal 5.2-4)

1. If you be circumcised (2)
2. Every man who is circumcised (3)
3. Justified by the law (4)

It is quite clear that Paul is talking about a teaching that at least some of the Galatians were at least considering, if they had not already done it: receiving circumcision.

- We'll talk about their purpose in this in a moment.

It is quite clear that this is the Jewish law Paul is talking about (these are very Gentile Christians – keep that in mind).

B. Revealed by other clues in Galatians

1. Keeping of seasons and days (Jewish holy days) (4.10)
2. The specific note that Titus was not required to be circumcised (2.3)
3. Numerous references to the law and the superiority of faith by the Spirit throughout the book

C. Revealed in the course of events in Acts (Ac 15.1ff.)

1. Certain men from Judea (1)
 - a. They are obviously Jews who professed to be believers ('taught brethren')
 - b. They came to Antioch
 - 1) Paul's home base
 - 2) Paul had just returned from 1st missionary journey – largely to Galatia
 - c. They taught: you must be circumcised to be saved

The commentaries are actually fairly weak in Galatians here – I’ll read one comment and point out its weakness (and its strength).

- “The legalists appear to have been claiming that circumcision was a necessary step in the process by which people become acceptable to God. These steps from their viewpoint were faith in Christ, reception of the Spirit, and circumcision of the flesh. Paul argued that anyone who submits to circumcision to gain acceptance with God really believes in salvation by law-keeping. If one believes in law-keeping for salvation, he must keep the whole Law, not just the requirement of circumcision. That is impossible for sinners to do. Rather than gaining acceptance with God circumcision would be what separated him from Christ.”¹

Weakness: ‘circumcision ... [to] become acceptable to God’ — it was actually circumcision in order to be saved (very important to see this)

Strength: seeing the three step process as taught by Judaizers, Christ, Spirit, Circumcision

2. Dissension in Antioch – delegation to Jerusalem (2)

- a. This is the catalyst for the first church council which the rest of the chapter is about
- b. The delegation includes Paul and Barnabas (and Titus? See Gal 2.3 noted above)

3. Certain of the Pharisees which believed (5)

- a. Demanded circumcision
- b. Demanded keeping Moses’ law

This information helps us see what motivated the Judaizers

- They were Pharisees by background (like Paul)

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible*, Ga 5:3 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

- They remembered Jewish requirements of circumcision for Jewish proselytes: Gentiles who became Jews
- They were worried about Gentiles becoming Christians (see Ac 11 after Peter preached to Cornelius)
- They thought those dogs will never live pure lives – but *if we can get them to keep the law* [this point is my speculation]
- They saw circumcision as a means to keep Christianity Jewish and to control the hordes of Gentiles pressing into the Church [again, my speculation]

At some point, probably right about this same time, Paul heard of others of this ilk who had arrived in Galatia and were teaching these things to his recent converts...

- And to make matters worse, apparently some of his converts were starting to follow them...

II. The allure of these doctrines

Our first reaction to this might be incredulity: how could anyone think this was a rational position to take?

I think there are three reasons

A. The general excitable character of these people as seen in Ac 14

1. Opposition at Iconium stirred up by the Jews (14.2, 4-5)
2. Almost worship at Lystra after a healing (14.11-13)
3. Stoning at Lystra (14.19-20)

So you see the mercurial nature of the Galatians, easily stirred up and inflamed (think: chanting crowds you see in TV in middle-eastern countries... nothing has changed)

BTW, I think our Western culture is becoming more and more unstable and excitable – people seem to have a real problem settling down in solid doctrine and Bible believing churches...

The churches have not done their jobs well in the last fifty years.

B. There is a natural desire of believers for assurance of salvation

1. What could be more assuring and certain than an external rite?
2. Suppose the false teachers approach, saying, ‘If you haven’t been circumcised, you aren’t saved – see, here it is in the Old Testament, the very Bible Paul preaches from, he just didn’t tell you about that part’
3. Circumcision becomes attractive as a means of certainty of salvation – if that’s what it takes, then I’m in, no worries after that

False teachers today say things like: “You must be baptized in order to be saved.”

- Church of Christ
- Roman Church (in particular it is *their* baptism you must receive)
- Many others

Some of these groups add many other religious requirements:

- Saturday worship
- Dietary laws
- Etc.

C. The Galatians were new believers: they were ignorant or thoughtless of the consequences of adding these ideas to their new faith (back to Gal 5)

1. Paul writes to the Galatians as brethren (5.11, 13)
2. Paul refers to the Galatians as ‘we’ (5.5)
3. The wording suggests that most of them, perhaps all of them, had not yet submitted to circumcision (5.2, 3)

So for these reasons, the Galatians were attracted to these ideas: excitability, the desire for certainty/assurance, and spiritual immaturity.

- All of these issues can lead to adopting poor doctrine today.

III. The destructive quality of threatening doctrines

A. Absolute incompatibility with faith in Christ (Gal 5.2-4)

1. Christ is no benefit to you if you receive circumcision (2)

“Christ will provide unlimited help to those who place their trust in him, but no help at all to those who bypass his saving work and think to become acceptable to God by circumcision or other legal observances.”²

2. If you submit to one law, you must submit to the whole law (3)

^{KJV} **Dt 27.26** Cursed *be* he that confirmeth not *all* the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen.

3. Seeking justification by the law? You have been severed from Christ (‘become of no effect’ – 4)

“To be cut off from relations with someone or something, to have nothing further to do with something (*cf.* Rm 7.2, 6).”³

- Is Paul teaching they could lose their salvation? No – but anyone who approached Christ this way may have no salvation to begin with.

B. Staggering blow to a victorious walk with Christ (Gal 5.7-9)

1. You have been hindered in the race (7)

- a. Term originally from military – a military in retreat would cut trenches through roads to slow pursuing armies down
- b. Came to refer to athletics – a runner who caused another runner to stumble hindered their race

In the same way, Christian living can be severely damaged, thrown off course, hindered, by teaching religious ritual is necessary for salvation.

2. You are listening to Satan (8)

Is it possible for believers to listen to Satan? Yes.

² Bruce, p. 229

³ Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 188, footnote 11.

3. You are in danger of corrupting many (9)

a. A proverb: “small causes, big results”⁴

“At stake in this matter is a principle. Like leaven this principle will prove to be of very comprehensive significance.”⁵

b. The whole church in Galatia could be affected

“Its converts may have been few but the believers must be on guard lest the error affect the entire church. Paul’s point may also have been that one apparently small deviation from the truth could destroy the entire system. If circumcision, for example, were made necessary for salvation, the whole grace system would fall.”⁶

c. Generations could be affected

It is possible for one generation to perhaps be believers but be trapped by the foolishness of a false teacher – but what about the next generation?

- What happens to faith if works give certainty?
- What happens to morality if religious works are sufficient?

Conclusion:

Proposition: Any work deemed to be essential to salvation besides faith alone in Christ alone will destroy liberty and the gospel itself.

You see, this notion of adding religious works to faith in Christ is a very pernicious doctrine.

“With the greatest possible force Paul now lets his apostolic authority come to expression ... He puts his readers before the dilemma: circumcision or Christ, everything or nothing.”⁷

⁴ Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 192.

⁵ Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 192.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 2:606 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985).

⁷ Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 187.

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