I heard about a preacher of the last century who preached on the same text, John 3:16, every Sunday for five consecutive years and never preached the same sermon. Well, I’ve been accused of preaching the same sermon for the past three months, only from a dozen different passages. And in a sense that’s true. Virtually every paragraph of the Book of Galatians from the first verse through today’s text has employed a different way of saying the same thing, namely that we are saved by believing, not by achieving.

Paul has marshaled argument after argument against the heretical legalists who had gained a foothold in the churches of Galatia–churches which he had established on his first missionary journey. But just as we are not to grow weary in well-doing, so we should not grow weary of hearing the truth. I don’t believe the Bible ever repeats itself without reason. If Paul takes more than four chapters to make his point, it’s probably because we need that kind of emphasis before the point sinks into our thick skulls. I would encourage you to look ahead, however, to the title of next week’s sermon, listed at the bottom of the outline, “And Now for the Rest of the Story.” Paul’s conclusion to this extensive diatribe against legalism may not be what you’re expecting.

But today we are going to get one more argument against legalism, perhaps the most hard-hitting of all. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Galatians 5, and we will read the first twelve verses. Since it tells us to stand in the first verse, I will invite you to stand, if you are able.

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

*You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. "I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*

This passage of Scripture can be divided into three parts: first Paul reveals the grave consequences which accrue to anyone who tries to earn his salvation (2-4). The second part stresses that the only thing that counts in regard to a right standing with God is a living faith (5-6). And in the third section, the Apostle gathers all his persuasive power in a final attempt to rescue his dear friends from the clutches of the false teachers (7-12).
Before we jump into the first section, I think we need to look again at verse 1, though we treated it as the conclusion of chapter 4 last Sunday. Because it is the theme verse of the entire book, it is essential that we hear what it has to say: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

What is that freedom that Christ purchased for us. It includes freedom from the wrath of God, from the power of sin, from the curse of the Law, from the tyranny of Satan and his demons, from the fear of judgment, from an accusing conscience. It also includes the freedom to live with a new kind of power, the freedom to love and give oneself to others, the freedom of immediate access to God the Father, and the freedom to relax in God’s presence and really enjoy life.

These are great freedoms, but why does Paul go to such lengths to stress the importance of maintaining them? Simply because they are so easily surrendered. I found the words of John Hanneman particularly meaningful:

We are prone to letting the heavy yoke be placed back on our shoulders. . . . we can be seduced by any number of different voices. Religious leaders may charge that we are not living up to the “real” Christian standard; the world tells us we are worthless; friends tell us we disappoint them; parents say they will love us if we do better; spouses point out our faults and withhold their affection. When we hear these voices, we immediately are tempted to engage the work-ethic engine that insists, “I can do it; I can do it. I think I can; I think I can.” We put our necks back in the yoke and try to earn approval through performance, placing ourselves under law once more.

Paul sees this as a very real danger that we will do this in our relationship with God, and he urges us to stand firm and resist it with all our might. We must not buy into the notion that we have to win acceptance with Him by means of our performance. We must remind ourselves daily that Christ has set us free. That freedom cannot be taken for granted; it must be vigorously guarded. It is not something that can be put in a bank vault and kept safe. It is not a privilege conferred, like an academic degree. Each day we must take up the stance of freedom again. If we fail to protect it deliberately and consciously, freedom will be lost.

It’s interesting to me that our country has been greatly stirred recently over our political and social and economic freedom. Literally millions went to the polls a few weeks ago to protest what they perceived as real threats to that freedom. But are we as concerned about a far more important freedom—that which Jesus purchased for us at the Cross?

We begin today’s message, then, in verse 2 with this proposition:

Any effort to obtain salvation by legalism (i.e. by law or works) leads inevitably to three grave consequences. (2-4)

1. “Christ will be of no value to you at all.” (2) That’s exactly what he says: “Mark
my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.” Notice the particular legalistic issue he focuses on is circumcision. Acts 15:1 explains why. Some Judaizers came from Jerusalem to Antioch and began teaching the Christians, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” That’s legalism in its most blatant form—“you have to keep this law or you can’t be saved.”

Paul responds boldly against this heresy. In fact, there’s no way he could express his convictions any more forcefully. He underlines his words, puts them in italics, and places 3 exclamation marks behind them. Contrary to the Judaizer's teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation, he asserts that circumcision can actually keep you from being saved. Now parents, please understand that he not talking about circumcision as a medical procedure that you may choose or forego for your baby boy. There’s a lot of debate today in the medical community about the validity of the procedure medically. That is not germane to this text. He’s talking about circumcision as an act of obedience to the Mosaic law.

Now ordinarily Paul viewed circumcision as an amoral issue without spiritual significance; it is something Jewish people traditionally practiced and Gentiles didn’t. In fact, right here in verse 5 he says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.” And again at the very end of this book, in verse 15 of chapter 6 he states, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.” Ultimately circumcision is no different than having your appendix removed. It is totally unrelated to one’s standing before God.

But the fact that the legalists insisted upon circumcision for salvation automatically turned it from a non-issue into a critical issue. Only instead of contributing to their salvation, circumcision would actually prevent it, the reason being that in demanding circumcision for salvation they were declaring that faith in Christ was insufficient.

Now Paul focuses on the issue of circumcision because that was the principal legalistic issue of his day. If he were writing in our day I believe he would use some other issue. No one I know of is teaching salvation by circumcision today, but there are plenty teaching salvation by good character, salvation by baptism, salvation by church membership, or salvation by social activism. These things, in and of themselves, do not render Christ of no value; in fact, they are all good things which Christ Himself urged his followers to pursue. But if they are viewed as means of salvation, that changes everything. Good deeds can actually keep you away from God; so can baptism; so can anything else that is added to the sacrifice Christ made. Every addition to faith is tantamount to denying the sufficiency of His death.

2. “You are obligated to obey the whole Law.” (3) Verse 3 states, “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.” The favorite theme of the legalists was circumcision, but circumcision was just one small part of the Mosaic Law. There is no logical way one seeking salvation by Law can stop with circumcision. To be consistent he also has to keep the dietary laws, the ceremonial laws, the tithing laws, the
religious feasts, the laws on dress, the laws about how to treat certain animals, etc.

James puts it this way: “For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.” A mirror with just one crack is still a broken mirror. We do not have the authority to pick and choose among God's laws.

Are legalists picking and choosing today? Let me use as an example to those who preach baptismal regeneration, the view that a person is actually saved by being baptized and cannot be saved without baptism. There are many churches that teach this—Protestant and Catholic, mainline and independent. We must grant them that baptism is a clear-cut command of Christ, and frankly, there is no excuse I know of for an adult believer in Christ not to obey this command.

But if one’s salvation depends upon obedience to Christ's command to be baptized, why stop there? Christ gave a lot of other commands, too. For example, He commanded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” Or what about Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not swear at all . . . Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘no’.” Does that mean that we are saved by loving God and never swearing? If the legalist who teaches salvation by baptism is going to be consistent, he would have to answer, “yes,” because the same Lord who told us to be baptized also told us to love God with all our hearts and not to swear.

You see, the weakest link in any doctrine of salvation by law or works is that salvation depends upon what we do and we can never quite be sure we have done enough. I like William Hendriksen's observation:

> If salvation is by Law, why should one be obliged to keep just one ceremonial commandment, or even two or three, and not the rest? If the pathway to salvation is thought to lie in that direction one should travel it to the very end. He will discover, however, that the base from which he started was located in enemy territory . . . and that the destination for which he is actually headed is “the curse.”

There's a third consequence which sounds even more serious.

3. “You have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (4)

Wow! Put simply, to add circumcision is to lose Christ; to seek to be justified by the law is to fall from grace. It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby admitting that you cannot save yourself, and then practice circumcision as a way of salvation. You have got to choose between a religion of works and a religion of grace!

I know some of you are dying to ask, “Then, Pastor, is Paul saying that one can lose his salvation?” To the disappointment of some of you I am not going to give a direct answer to that
question this morning. I will say two things, however. First, Galatians 5:4 contains very forceful words which constitute a very severe warning meant to be taken very seriously. And second, these words are addressed to professing Christians in an actual Christian church, who were beginning to turn away from God's gracious provision for sin and to turn toward legalism, law-keeping as a substitute.

I frankly think we make a mistake when we take every passage that is difficult to reconcile with one of our favorite doctrines (in this case, the doctrine of eternal security or the perseverance of the saints) and massage it until it fits. Wouldn't it be better for us to just admit the awful, dire consequences of legalistic Christianity and to shudder at even the thought of trying to contribute to our own salvation? That's what this passage ought to do for us.

Having laid these three heavy consequences upon us, the Apostle in verse 5 turns once more to the answer to legalism. If you can’t achieve a right standing with God through law or works, how is it obtained?

**The only thing that counts in regard to a right standing with God is a living faith. (5-6)**

Listen again to verses 5 & 6: “But *by faith* we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is *faith* expressing itself through love.” The righteousness he speaks of here is the kind that enables us to have a right standing with God and allows us to be judged “not guilty” at the Judgment. In one sense we have that right standing from the moment of conversion, but in another sense we eagerly await it. He’s simply observing that salvation or justification, while it is the present possession of the true believer, won’t be fully realized until the consummation.

Furthermore, this kind of righteousness must be given to us by God because none of us can earn it. And God gives it in response to faith. Twice Paul tells us that such right standing comes by faith. “*By faith* we await the righteousness.” And then, “The only thing that counts is *faith.*” He also tells us that this right standing comes “through the Spirit.” We’ll hear a lot more about His role in the coming weeks.

But please notice the little word “living” that I have put in this second point. He’s talking about a living faith. So many people misunderstand faith. One wag defined faith as “believing what you know ain’t true.” Well, faith may believe what it can’t see, but anyone who believes what he knows isn’t true is not a person of faith but a fool. A more common and more subtle error is that faith is mere intellectual agreement. Some seem to think that if their convictions, their viewpoints, and their worldview are reasonably in line with Scripture, they’re home free. That’s not what we mean when we say a right standing with God is attained by faith or that we’re saved by believing, not by achieving. Paul makes it clear he is talking about a faith expressing itself through love. The NASB translates that term “expressing” as “working.” It’s the Greek word from which we get our English word, “energizing.” Genuine faith always works itself out
in love. In fact, faith without works is dead; it stinks; it’s rotten. In our fight against salvation by works we must never convey the notion that the Christian life involves no effort or that a Christian can do as he pleases so long as he believes properly.

I really need to stop here for a moment. I do believe there is a scourge of dead orthodoxy in the Christian church. Pews are filled with people who believe the right things intellectually, say the right words, and, for the most part, avoid the worst sins. But that doesn’t cut it in God’s eyes. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” The question is,

- Does our faith make a difference in how we respond to our enemies?
- Does it make a difference in how we drive (road rage)?
- Does it make a difference in how we treat our spouse or children?
- Does it make a difference in our attitude toward the poor and needy?
- Does it make a difference in our attitude toward death?

Now in verses 7-12 the Apostle returns to the legalistic heresy and delivers his strongest warning yet about it.

**Paul will stop at nothing to rescue those who are in danger of falling from grace. (7-12)**

The tone of this section is one of strong persuasion. Paul is eager, in one last noble effort, to move the Galatians away from the brink of disaster.

1. **He chides them for veering away from God’s truth. (7-8).** Verse 7: “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?” The Galatians had a good beginning in their Christian experience. They had shown signs of growth and maturity. Then something had gone terribly wrong. Someone had cut in on them. One can picture a highway scene in which one driver cuts off another and sends his car into the ditch; or a scene on the slopes in which one careless skier cuts off another and sends him into the trees. Ultimately the one who did this to the Galatians was Satan, of course, working through the false teachers.

One thing is certain—their legalism did not originate with God. Verse 8: “That kind of persuasion does not come from the One who calls you.” Legalists are great at God-talk, but their doctrine does not come from Him.

2. **He warns them that perpetrators of legalism are like yeast (cancer) and will be punished. (9-10)** Verse 9 says, “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” Yeast is almost always a symbol of evil in the Scriptures. Its main characteristic is that it spreads and permeates every inch of the dough. That’s what false teaching, especially legalism, does in the church. I think the modern parallel to yeast might be cancer. The spirit of legalism does not suddenly overpower a church. Like yeast or cancer it is introduced secretly, it grows silently, and before long it infects the whole assembly.
But just because evil is spreading doesn't mean God will permit it to triumph. Look at the last half of verse 10: “The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.” Fortunately we don't have to assume responsibility for the judgment of the false teachers—God will deal with them.

3. He denies as absurd the inference that he himself still preaches legalism. (11) Apparently some of these false teachers were justifying their heresy by claiming that Paul agreed with them. Paul, of course, did at one time preach legalism, for he was an orthodox Jew and a member of the Sanhedrin in his pre-conversion, pre-Damascus Road days. And yes, even as an apostle he encouraged his half-Gentile colleague Timothy to go ahead and be circumcised so that he might have a more fruitful ministry among the Jews—an action he may have ended up regretting, since it was twisted to mean something very different than Paul intended.

But since his conversion Paul certainly never preached circumcision as a way of salvation. And to prove the point he asks, “If I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?” The bulk of Paul’s opposition came from the Jews because they saw him as a threat to their beloved Law. So he says, in effect, “I could avoid all this pain simply by telling people to get circumcised as the way to get right with God, but I won’t do it!” Why not? “Because it would abolish the offense of the Cross!” That may sound like a positive thing, but it’s not. When the offense of the cross is removed, so is its power.

I love the way Eugene Peterson expresses this: “If I were preaching that old message, no one would be offended if I mentioned the Cross now and then—it would be so watered-down it wouldn’t matter one way or the other.” There are many churches that mention the cross now and then, but it’s so watered down, it doesn’t offend anyone. But when the Cross is presented as the only way to God, sinners of all varieties are deeply offended. You see, to preach circumcision is to tell sinners they can save themselves by their own efforts; to preach Christ crucified is to tell them they cannot and only Christ can save them through the Cross. The message of circumcision (or any kind of legalism) exalts human effort and is therefore generally popular; the message of Christ crucified leaves no room at all for human pride, and thus is therefore unpopular and invites persecution.

Now our last verse is almost unique in the Bible.

4. Paul concludes with a shocking wish for the legalistic agitators. (12) “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” In effect he expresses the desire that these false teachers, who loved to use the knife in circumcision, would let the knife slip so they would castrate themselves and be rendered unable to reproduce themselves. I admit, it’s kind of a nasty word picture, but he is dealing with a very nasty heresy. Better to offend the sensibilities of his audience than to allow them to follow these heretics into a Christless eternity.

I wonder whether Paul might say it a little differently if he were speaking today, perhaps
something like this: “Would that those who are always preaching salvation by baptism might drown themselves in their beloved baptismal pools!” Or, “Would that those who preach salvation by works, would just work themselves to death!” To many in our day Paul’s expression sounds course and his wish reprehensible. But we may be sure he didn’t speak out of a malicious spirit or ill temper. He spoke out of a concern for the truth of the Gospel of grace.

Conclusion: Charles Swindoll once said, “Often we don’t get angry enough about the right things.” I agree. Some people blow a gasket when they hear of a whale being beached or some turtle eggs being disturbed, and yet yawn when told that ½ million babies have their lives snuffed out every year in our nation through abortion. Some are scandalized when a redwood tree is cut down but shrug at the 40,000 people killed each year by drunk drivers. We in the church can get all bent out of shape over a Bible teacher who is too Calvinistic, too charismatic, too dispensational, or even too wordy, but we hardly pay attention as to whether or not he’s a legalist.

Do we really value our freedom in Christ? Are we enjoying it? Are we willing to resist having it stolen from us? Freedom should never be a peripheral concern to us. It is absolutely central; it cannot be taken for granted; it must be vigorously defended.

Before we leave this morning, I want to make one more appeal to anyone who might be trusting in anyone or anything but Jesus Christ to save him. If you died tonight and stood before God, and He asked you, “Why should I let you spend eternity with me?” would you try to appeal to your own accomplishments or your own efforts or your baptism or your church membership, or would you humbly bow beneath the cross of Jesus?

I saw a cartoon of Regis Philbin standing at the final judgment. God had apparently asked him, “Why should I let you spend eternity with me?”, and Regis had apparently given an answer. But God had one more question. You know what it was: “Is that your final answer?” How about you? If you died tonight and stood before God, and He asked you, “Why should I let you spend eternity with me?” there’s only one answer that will be acceptable: “Because Jesus died for me.”

Won’t you commit your heart and life to Him this morning?

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i. John Hanneman, Choosing Freedom, Sermon #981, April 30, 1995, Peninsula Bible Church.

ii. These last five lines are substantially from Eugene H. Peterson, The Message, NavPress, 145.


v. Peterson, 397.