

D.A. Carson summarizes Galatians 5 well.

The beginning and the ending of Galatians 5, taken together, tell us a great deal about the Gospel that Paul preaches.

In the first part, Paul is still trying to persuade his Gentile Christian readers in Galatia that adding Jewish heritage and ritual to their Christian faith does not add something to it, but subtracts something from it. In particular, if they submit to circumcision, then “Christ will be of no value” to them at all (Gal. 5:2). Why not? What harm could arise from being circumcised? Paul explains that the Gentile who allows himself to be circumcised “is obligated to obey the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). That was the symbol-significance of circumcision: it was the mark of submission to the law-covenant. But to take that step betrays a massive failure to understand the true relationship between the law-covenant and the new covenant that the Lord Jesus Christ introduced. The former prepares for the latter, announces the latter, anticipates the latter. But to commit oneself to obeying the terms of the law-covenant is to announce that the new covenant Jesus secured by his death is somehow inadequate. These Galatians, who have in the past clearly understood that men and women are justified by grace through faith, are now “trying to be justified by law,” and in so doing “have been alienated from Christ”; it means nothing less than falling away from grace (Gal. 5:4). The ultimate righteousness will be ours at the end, when Jesus returns. Meanwhile, “by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope” (Gal. 5:5). To understand the crucial significance of Christ this way means that those who believe in Christ Jesus—what he has accomplished for us in his central place in redemptive history—know full well that circumcision itself is neither here nor there (Gal. 5:6). But circumcision actually subtracts from Christ if one undergoes it out of a desire to submit to a covenant that in certain respects Christ has made passé.

While in the first part of the chapter Paul talks about the work of Christ, he slips in a brief mention of the Spirit: “By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope” (Gal. 5:5, italics added). Already the Spirit is given to believers, consequent upon Christ’s work. Christians, then, are those who “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25), who display the lovely fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Pursue those things; there is no law against them, and they stand over against the wretched acts of our sinful nature (Gal. 5:19-21; cf. Prov. 6:16-19) against which the Law pronounced but which it could not overcome. (D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, April 3 devotion)

5:2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

5:3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.

After Paul has provided a theological foundation in 2:16-5:1, he exhorts the Galatians not to receive circumcision. If they abandon Christ to return to the Law they will receive no salvation. That is, if they think that they can receive some sort of benefit in circumcision for salvation, they cannot benefit from Christ. The two do not go together.

“If keeping the law leads to salvation, then Christ is superfluous. If what human beings do becomes the basis of salvation, then praise and honor rebound to those who perform the required works. But if salvation is the work of Christ, He receives the praise and honor for redeeming His people. Paul categorically rejects human works because they rule out the importance and centrality of Christ. They make the work of Christ a cipher. They deprive Him of His glory, and human idolatry rather than God’s glory takes center stage” (Schreiner, 318).

As Paul says in verse 3, if someone submits to circumcision and decides he will be saved by keeping the Law, he must keep the Law perfectly. However, since perfect obedience is impossible, he will surely receive an unfavorable judgment when he stands before God. Paul had already stated this in 3:10.

The point of verses 2 and 3 is not that circumcision in itself is wrong, but that any act is wrong that we do to bribe God for blessings. Circumcision happened to be the foremost requirement of the Judaizers who were teaching the Galatians to work their way into God's favor. Galatians 2:3–5 reminds us how circumcision relates to freedom and slavery.

Verse 3 says the same thing a bit differently. "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is a debtor to do the whole law." This verse teaches that the mindset of slavery is the mindset of a debtor—one who is under pressure to pay back what he has borrowed or needs to borrow. All the works of the law (including circumcision) are the currency with which the Judaizers aim to satisfy their debts to God. And the surprising point of the verse for us is that God does not want to deal with us as debtors in this way (Piper).

5:4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Warnings such as this one do not imply that our salvation can be lost, but are the means by which God causes us to persevere in the faith - the truly saved will heed God’s warnings and not leave Christ. Therefore, warnings are not *opposed* to the promises of God, they are the *means* God uses to fulfill His promises. Grace in perseverance is the powerful work of God which He exerts freely in our lives to keep us from falling away.

Perseverance is not some agonizing human effort; rather, it is clinging to Christ and denouncing reliance on oneself. Those who belong to God know that their only hope is in Christ. “Apostasy in Galatians constitutes reliance on one’s own works, while those who persevere realize afresh every day that they are naked, and miserable, and weak, and therefore must rely on Christ and His righteousness alone for life. Faith looks eagerly ahead to the last day when the righteousness that is now ours through Christ is declared to the world and confirmed to us” (Schreiner, 319).

Works of the Law and grace are mutually exclusive. The key to freedom is to keep depending on grace.

5:5 For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.

5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

Verse 5 describes the life of freedom.

The words "waiting" and "hope" show that Paul is speaking of the believer's future righteousness. Even though we have already been declared righteous by faith in Christ and clothed with His righteousness (Romans 5:1; 1 Corinthians 1:30), righteousness is not yet fully a present reality (Phil. 3:12-16); the final judgment lies ahead at which time the final verdict will be spoken and we will be made fully and ethically righteous.

Thus, two phrases in verse 5 sum up how we are to wait for the last day. First, we wait "through the Spirit." Our lives began by a work of the Spirit and our lives go on by the work of the Spirit (3:3). Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (2:20). Secondly, we wait for the hope of righteousness "by faith." The key to freedom is to keep depending on grace.

Instead of depending on the Law to attain righteousness, the believer clings to Christ by faith and awaits the day when he will be fully declared righteous before God. Thus, faith in Galatians 5:5 is not merely a past decision; it is an ongoing way of waiting for the hope of righteousness. This ability and perspective is the work of the Spirit (v. 5).

Verse 6 gives the ground, or the basis, for the righteousness that is received on the last day (5:5). The reception of a positive verdict with God is not due to our efforts, for all of our efforts will fall short in the end. Rather, it is faith that takes hold of future blessings, for faith is dependent upon what God has done in Christ.

Furthermore, this faith works itself out in acts of love toward others (5:6, 13-16).

5:7 You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?

The Galatians had been running well. That is, they had responded to the gospel of grace when Paul had first preached it, and had received the Holy Spirit (3:1-5). They had trusted in Christ rather than relying on their own accomplishments. They were growing in their faith, but the Judaizers were beginning to tell them otherwise. "Obeying the truth" simply means to believe the truth of the gospel (Jn. 6:28-29).

5:8 This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you.

5:9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.

The Judaizers who were trying to persuade the believers to follow the Law were not from God and the evil they bring will spread like leaven in dough. Paul uses the same expression in 1 Corinthians 5:6 where he asks, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" Leaven, when placed in dough, permeates the whole lump. In the same way, sin spreads, in whatever form it is found (cf. Gal. 5:9). Although leaven was not always a symbol of evil (Lev. 23:17; Matt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20-21), it was often used as such (Exo. 12:14-20; Mk. 8:15ff; Lk. 12:1).

5:10 I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.

5:11 But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.

5:12 I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.

Despite the attack on the church Paul is confident that the churches in Galatia will remain firm in the gospel. The opponents, however, will be judged. The singular "the one" and "he" could be referring to a particular individual or be a reference to the group as a single unit – as one.

"Paul's words of assurance in 5:10 provide confidence that the Lord will finish the good work which he has begun (Phil. 1:6). The Lord saves and continues to preserve to the end those whom He has called. Therefore, the confidence in believers is not ultimately in themselves but in the Lord, who summoned them to Himself. Believers look away from themselves to Christ and trust His promise that He will keep all those who have entrusted their lives to Him" (Schreiner, 329; Jn. 6:37).

Verse 11 is difficult to understand. In Galatians, it is clear that Paul did NOT preach circumcision to be saved; however, it is also clear from other passages of Scripture that he did not refuse circumcision to those who wanted to be circumcised provided that it was not seen as a meritorious work that added to salvation (cf. Act 16:3). Here are some suggestions:

1) Perhaps the Judaizers were accusing Paul of hypocrisy, and were persecuting him for what they saw as an inconsistency. Because Paul had not preached circumcision with the same connotations that the Judaizers did, had he done so, the conflict with the cross would have been eliminated.

2) Maybe "some of the Judaizers even circulated the slander that Paul preached circumcision in order to ruin his influence" (RWP).

3) Calvin suggests that Paul was saying, "It would be completely in my power to avoid the displeasure of men, and every kind of danger and persecution, were I only to mix ceremonies with Christ. The earnestness with which I oppose them is not on my own account, nor for my own advantage" (Calvin).

In verse 12 Paul uses irony to express his strongest disdain against the Judaizers and their desire to add works of the law to the gospel of grace. He is not telling them to literally mutilate themselves. In a similar way he refers to circumcision as “mutilation” in Philippians. In essence he is saying, “Your “cutting” is of no more value than pagan cuttings.” (Schreiner, Galatians)

“Often difficulties arise in the Christian life when believers begin to doubt the truth of the gospel. Deviant teachings abound, and intellectual objections to the Christian faith seem to have no end. Part of what it means to persevere is to continue to believe in the gospel despite the objections that are constantly raised against it. Persistence in faith takes place in the midst of trials and difficulties. Faith battles through the uncertainties and perplexities raised by life and continues to trust Christ in the end” (Schreiner, 328).

5:13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

“For” probably introduces a new section. The purpose behind Christ calling us was that we experience freedom. “Only” qualifies what Paul means by freedom; freedom should never be viewed as permission to pursue and indulge in ungodly desires. The “flesh” is who we are in Adam, as human beings apart from Christ. As Christians we’re called to freedom from servitude; now, in love, they are to submit to it. True freedom is the ability to act as God designed us and not be enslaved to self-centered desires. It is thus manifested in the desire to put others first and fulfill their needs. In Exodus God freed the Jews from slavery to serve Him (Exo. 4:23; 19:4-6; 20:1-6; Lev. 25:42). “The redemption believers enjoy liberates them to pursue goodness so that they can serve others with gladness” (Schreiner, 334).

Schreiner says, “True freedom must never be equated with natural human desires. Human beings as sons and daughters of Adam conceive of freedom as the removal of all constraints so that we are able to do whatever we want. Freedom for Paul, however, cannot be equated with natural desire, for the latter is the product of the flesh and a human will turned upon itself. Human beings are truly free when they are no longer under the dominion of natural desires. Freedom does not come by giving into fleshly desire but, paradoxically enough, is found when believers serve others. Those who are constrained by natural desires are not free but slaves, whereas those who live in love are liberated to serve others, so that slavery to the will of God is perfect freedom” (Schreiner, 336).

5:14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

5:15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

The word “for” in verse 14 introduces the basis for Paul’s comment that “through love serve one another.” Loving others fulfills the Law. It is astonishing that Paul would bring this up here for he has argued for four and a half chapters that those under the Law are enslaved to sin, under a curse, excluded from sonship, are not children of the promise, and under God’s judgment. Is Paul now insisting

that the Law needs to be followed to some degree after he has just said that whoever keeps part of the law needs to keep it all (5:3)? The answer, of course, is no. In 5:3 Paul referred to the person who kept the Law as a debtor and doing the Law as a burden. In verse 13 he refers to loving others as freedom. Verse 3 talks about doing the Law, verse 14 talks about fulfilling the Law. In other words, the contexts are different.

Paul is not arguing that the OT ceremonial and civil laws have passed away, but Christians are still under the OT moral laws. Rather, he is saying that believers are no longer under the OT Law at all. Nevertheless, life in the Spirit fulfills what the Law intended.

There is no more fulfilling way to live than to draw daily on God's all-satisfying grace and let it flow through us to meet the needs of others. Verses 14 and 15 give us a positive and a negative incentive to live like this. First, verse 14: Live like this, "for the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" In spite of all the negative things that Paul has said about "works of the law," it is not a matter of indifference whether Christians fulfill the law in their behavior. The good news is that love, which is an overflow of God's grace, is what fulfills the law.

Paul and Moses (Leviticus 19:18) and Jesus (Luke 10:27) *assume* that all people love themselves; they don't command it: "You shall love your neighbor as you (already) love yourself." And the self-love they assume is not self-esteem but self-interest: all people want to be happy, even if they often don't know what will really make them happy. We can know this is how Paul understands this verse because of how he applies it in Ephesians 5:28, 29. "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For *no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes* it, as Christ does the church." In other words, self-love means the strong interest you have in your own health and safety and happiness.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is not a command to love yourself. It is a command to take your natural, already existing love of self and make it the measuring rod of your love for others. There is not a harder command in the Bible than this one. It means: Want to feed the hungry as much as you want to feed yourself when you get hungry. It means: Want to find your neighbor a job as much as you are glad you have a job. Want to help your fellow student get A's as much as you want to get A's. Want to help the person stalled on the freeway as much as you are glad you are not stalled on the freeway. Want to give the poor softball player a chance to play as much as you want to play the whole game. Want to share Christ with your neighbor as much as you are glad you know Christ yourself.

Use all the creativity and energy and perseverance to do good things for others that you use in doing good things for yourself. Care about what happens to others as much as you care about what happens to yourself. Can you imagine what the church would be like if we were all like that: looking at the person to the right and to the left and feeling the same longing for their happiness that we feel for our own. Not only would the law be fulfilled, this place would be iridescent with joy, and the glory of God would be unmistakably present in our midst. And people would be converted! Let's be like that in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For if we don't, verse 15 gives the tragic alternative: "If you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another." A church of people who do not serve each other in love will destroy itself. (Piper)