

What is in view

Paul is turning the corner in his letter; he is moving from the foundational truths about life in Christ to the practical implications. And here he sounds the death knell for the legalists; he asserts that if we give in to the call to live by rules we actually undermine our ability to live in the grace that comes to us through Jesus.

What is helpful to note

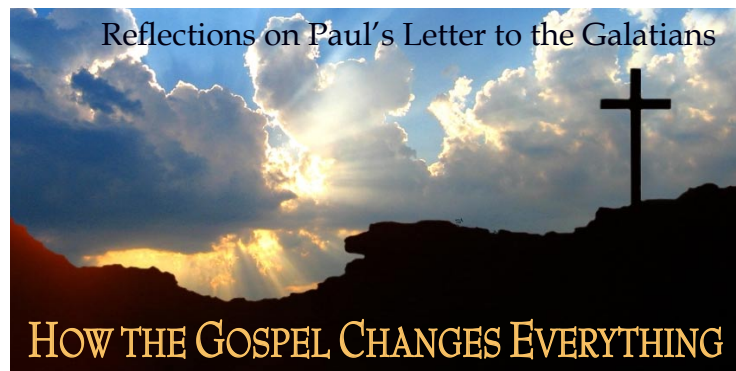
Paul makes his point emphatic in 5:1: It is "For freedom!" and not for anything else that Jesus has set us free. We will see (as we get further into chapter 5) that this doesn't mean that He has set us free *from* life with God, but He has set us free *for* life with God. And, any submission to any kind of "moral reformation" plan undermines this life of freedom that Jesus offers to those who believe.

Here Paul draws attention to the act of circumcision; that was not all the Judaizers/legalists were calling for, but it was a significant representative act. By submitting to circumcision (which was a defining mark of the Old Testament covenant), the believers were declaring their submission to rules-based approach to life with God. It was not simply the act itself that Paul was condemning, but what the act indicated about how life with God was to be lived out was in view.

Paul affirms that if a believer were to submit to a rules-based approach to life with God, it would result in (at least) three serious consequences. He touches on them in 5:2-5.

"Christ has set us free and this act of liberation has consequences. Because of it, believers should resist any attempt to bring them into bondage of any sort. A great price has been paid to bring about their freedom; let them then live in the freedom into which Christ has brought them."

Leon Morris



First, he says that "Christ will be of no advantage to you."¹ It is not that Christ's work itself would be rendered meaningless or useless, but that the ongoing personal impact of Christ's work would be lost; for a believer to submit to rules results in the loss of experience of the richness of Christ's gift.

He also mentions that the one who submits to circumcision is then "obligated to keep the whole law" (3:3). F. F. Bruce noted that to submit to circumcision in order to experience life with God means that such a person is accepting "the principle of salvation by law-keeping, and salvation by law-keeping implies salvation by keeping the whole law."² To embrace the principle of "ongoing holy living by rules" means one must keep all the rules!

Lastly, Paul affirms that to adopt this approach results in one being "severed" from Christ and is a departure from grace (5:4).³ Paul's language of being "severed" from Christ is the same language he used to speak of a covenant being "annulled" in 3:17. The idea is "to render ineffective." If you choose to live by rules, you detach yourself from the experience of living by grace through faith in Jesus.

Paul is not suggesting that the Galatian Christians who are being ensnared by legalism are going to lose their salvation. Paul's concern is that their *on-going experience of life with God* will be undermined by the legalists' approach to holy living.

Talking to your group

The three-legged race analogy is helpful; we can be tethered to only one. Either we will run the race of life closely united by faith to Jesus and the Spirit; through grace and by promise we will be changed. Or we will attempt to run the race of life tied to rules and law; through our own efforts and by trying harder we will attempt to be transformed.

This builds on the idea of last week's discussion. There are only two ways of life: by human effort or by grace through faith by the Spirit. Last week, Paul made that clear. This week he underscores what we miss if we resort to adopting the legalists' approach. And, what the legalist loses is tragic!

"[Galatians 5:5] presents the contrast represented by the emphatic introductory pronoun 'we.' It refers to those who together with Paul fix their hope not on law, but on Christ."
Herman Ridderbos

¹ESV; "no benefit to you," NASB; "no value to you," NIV; "will profit you nothing," NKJV.

²F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

³ESV, NASB; "alienated," NIV; "estranged," NKJV.

Thinking . . .

Have you ever been in a “three-legged race”? If so, what was the experience like?

What is the key to winning when your leg is strapped to another’s?

Reflecting . . .

The image of a three-legged race may help us understand what Paul is driving at in his further comments regarding the “legalists” who were troubling the Galatians. Read 5:1-6.

Having been set free from the bondage of sin by Christ, what was the danger now facing the Galatian believers?

In what way would they be at risk of submitting “again” to the yoke of slavery?

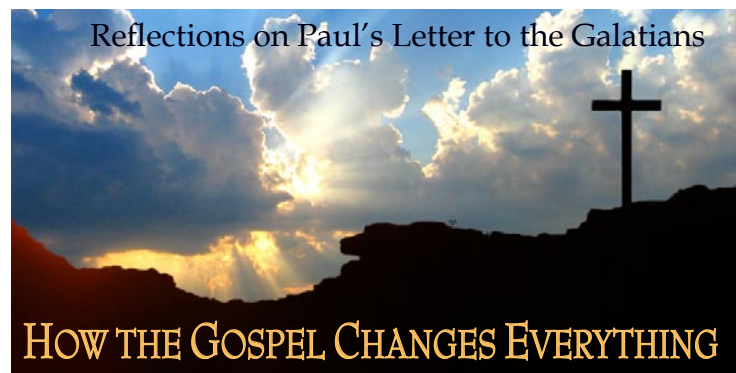
If these believers gave into the call of the well-meaning but misguided “rules-keepers,” what would they be at risk of losing? Why?

Responding . . .

Like a three-legged race, we are running “yoked” to one of two things: either living our lives vitally connected to Jesus through faith and by the Spirit or strapped to rules and the law. Why must this be an “either-or” situation? Why can’t it be a “both-and” kind of approach to life?

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