

Study Notes on Galatians 5

Intro. In chapter four the prominent word is bondage; in chapter five liberty. Paul shows how that seeking justification by the Law brings those who attempt it into bondage to the elemental things of the world. They are like sons who have not yet grown up enough to receive their inheritance. In this chapter, Paul urges the Galatians to stand firm in the liberty to which they have been called through the gospel. It is liberty from the bondage to the law and its rudiments; it is liberty from enslavement to sin and death itself.

The appeal to stand in gospel liberty and not return to the Law (Gal. 5:1-12)

It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Keep standing firm (present imperative) and do not be subject again to (holding up for oneself) the yoke of slavery. Perhaps this verse belongs to what has been said in chapter 4, summarizing and applying it. Thus, it serves as a basis for the discussion that now ensues, viz., the dangers of keeping the Law.

Consequences of submitting to the Law as a means of justification?

Paul states these out of his own apostolic authority, "Behold, I Paul". If you receive circumcision (as a means of righteousness, this one act implies submission to all else, it was the ritual that made one a proselyte), Christ will be of no benefit to you (v. 2). Christ's sacrifice is appropriate by faith, not works. Paul had shown this in 3:13-14. If you receive circumcision (as a means of righteousness, you are under obligation to keep the whole Law (v. 3). Paul had developed this argument that the Law demands perfect obedience to all commands in 3:10.

If one seeks justification by law (the Law), you have been severed from Christ and fallen from grace (v. 4-5)

Paul contrasts the conduct of those who seek justification by faith (5:5-6) We (believers, put forward for emphasis) through the Spirit (that is by His work in us) by (Gr. "out of") faith (trusting in Christ, not in our own works) are waiting for the hope of righteousness (we look for God's own verdict of righteousness at the judgment based on the sacrifice of Christ).

This phrase explains, "by faith" as opposed to keeping the Law. For neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything, (that is, in connection with Christ) but faith working through love (v. 6) This is the how the principle of faith manifests itself in life. It produces works of obedience out of a loving heart but not in order to earn righteousness by merit.

Comments about those who were influencing the Galatians (5:7-12)

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? (v. 7) It was not Christ who called you that has persuaded you to keep the Law! (v. 8)

A little leaven leavens the whole lump (the pervasiveness of false teaching). This influence will continue to spread until all are effected (v. 9)

I believe you will follow the truth; but the one who disturbs you shall be judged by the Lord (v. 10)

Perhaps this difficult verse is best explained as answering a false charge made against Paul—“Paul preaches circumcision”. Perhaps such a charge was derived from Paul’s own willingness to accommodate the Jewish people by circumcising Timothy for example (Ac. 16). The charge is not true. But if it were true, then Paul raises a question:

Why am I still being persecuted? If I teach what they teach, why do they persecute me?

For in teaching circumcision the “offense” (skandalon) of the cross is removed. I.e. what had caused the Jews to reject the gospel has been by circumcision made null and void.

Using a play on words Paul wishes that the circumcision party would indeed “castrate themselves” (being used figuratively) from the Galatians because they trouble the Galatians by their false doctrine (v. 13). Or, as Lenski suggests, if the charge is that Paul preached circumcision, then the false teachers must do more, namely, let themselves be castrated!

The appeal not to abuse liberty but to walk by the Spirit and thus fulfill the Law (Gal. 5:13-6:10)

Freedom in Christ must not be abused (v. 13-15)

Perhaps this section best connects with v. 8. The Galatians had not been called to keeping the Law, but to freedom.

Christian freedom is not an opportunity for the flesh.

Freedom brings the obligation to serve others through love. We slave “for each other”.

Ironically, we show our freedom by making ourselves servants of others!

When we do, the whole Law is fulfilled through loving others (v. 14) Some may have thought that the Law was needed to check or curb the flesh and that release from it would bring a sinful life. Paul shows that the life of love produced by the Spirit of God is sufficient to check the flesh and produce the fruit of holiness.

But if they bite and devour (durative presents), then all may be destroyed by it (v. 15)

Walk by the Spirit instead (v. 16-25)

Walking by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (v. 16)

For the flesh sets its desire against the spirit; and the spirit against the flesh, so that you may not do the things that you please (v. 17).

But if you walk by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

This suggests that keeping the Law is not only not essential to justification but also not essential to overcoming the flesh (v. 18).

The deeds of the flesh are:

The fruit of the Spirit is:

Those who belong to the Lord have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (v. 24)

Thus, if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit (v. 25)

This marks the transition to the next section of practical exhortations that demonstrate the life of loving service toward others (5:26-6:10).