

Ministry of Grace Church

Galatians Chapter 5

Introduction

What's the difference between grace and mercy? I have spent almost the entire week trying to figure out how I can work this into today's message. The fact that I'm talking about it here up front probably means that I failed.

Nevertheless, let me ask you the question again. What is the difference between grace and mercy? Mercy means that you did *not* receive some retribution that you justly deserve. Like when you get stopped for speeding, but the policeman does not give you a ticket, just a warning. That's mercy. Grace, on the other hand, means receiving something good that you absolutely don't deserve. Like us receiving salvation – “**For by grace are you saved through faith.**” We didn't deserve it, we don't deserve it, and we never will deserve it, but God gave it to us anyway. That's saving grace.

OK, now that that's out of the way, we can get on with today's message.

Christ Has Set Us Free

Galatians 5:1-6

¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Notes:

If you compare various translations of verse one, here, you will see quite a discrepancy. I believe the most accurate, literal translation is:

Stand firm, therefore, in the freedom with which Christ has made us free.

Paul's point is that faith in Christ has freed us from the bondage of legalism and the strict requirements of the Law. We do not have to follow the Law or all the rules in any church in order to be acceptable to God. All we have to do is believe in the blood of Jesus which has redeemed us. Remember, our redemption means that we have been purchased and forever removed from the slave market. And, because of our belief in what Jesus has done, because of our faith, God has declared us to be sinless, innocent, and righteous before Him. Therefore – since you have been set free, Paul says, stand firmly in this freedom. Don't waver and certainly don't go back to the slavery that you have been freed from.

The great evangelist D. L. Moody illustrated this point by quoting an old former slave woman in the South following the Civil War. Being a former slave, she was confused about her status and asked:

Now is I free, or been I not? When I go to my old master he says I ain't free, and when I go to my own people they say I is, and I don't know whether I'm free or not. Some people told me that Abraham Lincoln signed a proclamation, but master says he didn't; he didn't have any right to.

Many Christians are confused on the same point. Jesus Christ has given us an “Emancipation Proclamation,” but our “old master” tells us that we are still slaves to a legal relationship with God. As a result, we live in bondage because our “old master” has deceived us.

Now, in all fairness, the Galatians hadn't rejected grace in favor of the Law. They simply added some of the requirements of the Law to make it “better,” somehow. By becoming circumcised, and following other portions of the Law, they could “feel” like they were pleasing God. They had something they could feel proud about, they could feel like they were doing something for God. But righteousness is not a “feeling,” it is a state of being. We are righteous before God, not because we have earned it, but because God has declared it to be so.

Let's not pass over this too quickly. When God makes a proclamation, it happens, not half way, not some day, not “if we meet certain conditions.” It happens – immediately – and completely! It IS and it will forever be! During creation, when God said, “Let there be light,” it happened immediately and could not be undone. The moment we accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, God declared us to be righteous, innocent, Not Guilty. It happened immediately, and it cannot be undone either. It didn't depend on us obeying a set of rules, it happened the moment He declared it, and it forevermore will be.

Paul then goes on to point out that keeping part of the Law is never sufficient. There is no such thing as living by grace *and* living by the Law. He says:

... every man who accepts circumcision ... is obligated to keep the whole law.

We cannot be “saved by faith” and then “live by law.”

Now, verse four is one of those verses that has been misinterpreted and mistaught for years. Let's look at it carefully.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

There is a condition stated, “you who would be justified by the Law.” This could also be stated as, “If you could be and were, in fact, justified by obeying the Law ...” And, there are two effects of this condition.

The first effect is, “you are severed from Christ.” The Greek word translated “severed” means “to be made entirely useless or of no effect at all.” It does NOT say that we have been separated from Christ (something that was done **to** us). The verb translated “you are severed” is in the active voice (it is something that you have done to yourself.) It's not something that is done to you. It means that you have rejected the sacrificial death of Christ and it has no effect on you or your

righteousness. Remember, the condition was, “If you are justified by the Law.” – But we aren’t justified by law, so we have not separated ourselves from Christ.

The second effect is, “then you have fallen away from grace.” I don’t know how many times I have heard someone say that this means you have lost your salvation. It usually comes in the form of, “If you sin certain sins, then you have fallen from grace, you have lost your salvation.” Or, “If you sin too many times, then you will lose your salvation, you have fallen from grace.” There is a theological word for this. It is “nonsense!”

Even if “falling from grace” were a reference to losing one’s salvation, remember the condition was, “If you are justified by the Law.” – But we can’t be and we aren’t justified by obeying the Law so we have NOT, and we CANNOT be fallen from grace!

Remember, earlier in Galatians Paul said that if you could be saved by keeping the Law, then Jesus’ death on the cross was useless? He said,

for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Galatians 2:21)

He is, in effect, stating the same thing here. If obeying the Law keeps you righteous before God, then you have left the camp of grace, that is, Jesus’ death has no effect on you, and have joined the camp of attempted Law keepers.

Let me state again very clearly, “You cannot lose your salvation!” Remember, God has declared you to be innocent, that is, Not Guilty, and you can never be pronounced guilty again. Also, remember

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

If you did not do anything to earn your salvation, then there is nothing you can do to lose it. Grace means that you didn’t deserve it, you don’t deserve it, and you never will deserve it, but God gives it to you anyway, permanently!

You Were Called to Freedom

Galatians 5:7-15

⁷You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Notes:

Paul now turns to one of his favorite sports analogies. Everyone was familiar with the Olympic Games of Paul’s day. The highpoint of the games was the foot race to see who was the fastest.

Here, Paul combines this sports analogy with a military analogy. The word translated “hindered” is a military term that means “to cut through a roadway.” The purpose of this was to hinder the movement of enemy troops. So, what Paul is saying is, “Look, you came out of the starting blocks great, so why did you allow someone to put an obstacle in your way to slow you down? He then refers to this legalism that had crept into the churches in Galatia as leaven. Everyone knows that even the tiniest amount of leaven in a loaf of bread dough will eventually spread to the entire loaf. This is Paul’s way of saying, “Don’t even accept a tiny bit of legalism into your churches, because it will spread without stopping.

Paul now levels a personal attack, something that he rarely does. However, he does so in a very punny way. You see, the Greek word for circumcise means “to cut completely around.” The word translated here as “emasculate” is a word that means “to completely cut off,” or “to amputate.” So, Paul is saying that he wishes that those people who made the Galatians think that they had to be circumcised in order to be saved would amputate a certain part of their body instead of just circumcising it. Now, before you take this out of context and accuse Paul of using a crude analogy, you need to understand that there were cults in Galatia that required their members to do this very thing. So, Paul is referring to a well-known, though idiotic, practice.

He now gets back to his idea about freedom. Remember, he started off this chapter with:

Stand firm, therefore in the freedom with which Christ has made us free.

Our salvation freed us from the bondage of slavery, the Law. There were some then, even as there are some now, who claimed that since we were set free from the Law, and Christ’s death paid for all our sins (past, present, and future), then we can live however we want, without any repercussion. But Paul says that our freedom should not be used as an excuse to let our sin nature go wild. The reason, he says, is because there is one principle in the Law that all Christians should hold out ever before our eyes. It is, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**”

You see, if our focus is on constantly showing love to those around us and we are not doing anything that would hinder the spiritual walk of another Christian, then our focus is not on ourselves. If we are constantly thinking of ways to help others and to make their lives better, then we will not spend any time at all satisfying our own sinful desires.

Keep in Step with the Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by

the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Notes:

Every person ever born has a sin nature that is constantly causing him or her to focus on gratifying self, that is, to love oneself. But we were just told once again to “love our neighbors as ourselves.”

The Holy Spirit living in us wants us to be more Christ-like, that is, loving others as we love ourselves. So, inside every Christian there is a constant battle going on, the Holy Spirit against our flesh (our sin nature). If we listen to our sin nature, we will be “me” focused. If we listen to the Spirit within us, we will be “others” focused.

If I were to say to you, “Don’t think of an elephant,” the first thing you do is to think of an elephant, right? You see, our minds can focus on something, but our minds can’t “not focus” on something. The only way we can resist focusing on something is to focus on something else. So, we can’t simply “not obey the desires of the flesh.” Instead, we need something else to be the center of our attention. The “easiest” (that is to say, “laziest”) way to do this is to develop a set of rules. As long as we are focusing on the rules, we can keep our minds off the things we’re supposed to avoid. But that’s living under law. That’s living a passive Christian life. While we were young, we needed the rules to help us decide what to do. But now that we are grown, we need to be able to live active Christian lives without a strict set of rules.

That is, we need to be led by the Spirit who is living within us. The problem is - the world around us is shouting loudly about the things our sin nature wants to do, and the Spirit talks to us with a “quiet whisper.” We’ll talk more about this in a minute.

Now, in verse 19, Paul delineates some of the desires of our sin nature. In the interest of time, I am not going to go into a detailed explanation of what each of these is. I would advise each of you to read a commentary on these verses to get a better understanding of what they are. We really don’t want to focus on these, anyway. Instead, we want to focus on pursuing the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). If we are focused on these, we will be less likely to be drawn away by our sin nature.

Before we go on, however, I do want to look at one of these desires of the flesh, because of its misunderstanding in today’s society. It is the word “sorcery.” It comes from the Greek word *pharmakeia*, the word that our English word pharmacy comes from. The practice of witchcraft in Paul’s day made heavy use of mind-altering drugs. Today the use of mind-altering drugs is in vogue. Some of these drugs have even become legal. Society says that it’s OK. Paul tells us here that the desire for drugs (including alcohol) is a work of our flesh and needs to be avoided if we want to walk in the Spirit.

So What?

Earlier in this chapter of Galatians, Paul said:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16)

So, what does it mean to “walk by the Spirit?”

Remember that this entire letter is addressing the fact that false teachers were telling the Galatians that although they were saved by faith, they also had to be circumcised and keep portions of the Law to be “completely” saved or, perhaps, to stay saved.

Paul does a good job of summarizing his response to this in his letter to the church in Ephesus where he says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And, as a result of our salvation by faith, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, *who opposes our flesh*. So – there is a constant battle going on within Christians, our sin nature telling us to do things that the Spirit tells us not to do. In the midst of that battle, we can do one of three things:

1. We can do nothing. That is, we can walk by the flesh (sin nature). This is the easiest thing to do. We don't even have to try. It comes naturally. But – it prevents a Christian from having peace, because our conscience, and the Holy Spirit, will not let us have peace.
2. We can walk by the Law, by a set of rules. This takes more work. We have to decide what the rules are and we have to make sure that we obey those rules. This is where the Christians in Galatia were. But – it also prevents a Christian from having peace. It produces pride, which brings a counterfeit peace, not real peace, and it brings enmity with God.

The third thing we can do in the midst of the battle between our flesh and the Spirit of God, is -

3. We can walk by the Spirit. This is the toughest way to walk, but it is the only way a Christian can have true peace.

We can only do one of these three things. We can't walk by the Spirit if we are focused on the Law and we can't walk by the Spirit if we are walking by the flesh. So, in order to have peace, we have to walk by the Spirit. Paul calls this being in step with the Spirit. So, once again, we come to the question, “How do I walk in step with the Spirit of God?”

In order to do this, we need to listen to what the Spirit tells us. Well, that sounds easy enough, doesn't it?

Last week we talked about God taking Abraham outside at night and telling him to recount the story in the stars. We can't do that today. Not simply because we don't know the story, but because we can't see the constellations the way Abraham could. When Abraham went outside, it was dark, very dark. Today, as long as we're anywhere near any center of civilization there is so much light pollution that we can't see all the stars that Abraham could see. Think about it. When was the last time you were able to look up on a clear night and actually see the Milky Way?

Walking with the Spirit has a similar challenge. In order to walk in step with the Spirit, we have to listen to what the Spirit of God is telling us. However, there are so many voices coming at us throughout the day, telling us to satisfy our fleshly desires, that it is hard to hear the gentle whisper of the Spirit of God. Even the great prophet Elijah had a hard time listening to God. There was so much clamor around him, what with Queen Jezebel looking to assassinate him, that he had to run away and head out into the wilderness. He was all by himself in a cave trying to hear what God had to tell him. It is described in the nineteenth chapter of the book of 1 Kings.

As he was waiting to hear from the Lord, there came a mighty wind, followed by an earthquake, and then a fire, but God was not in any of them. Then, after all the commotion quieted down, there came the sound of a quiet whisper, the voice of God.

Now What?

That's how the Spirit of God talks to us today. Many of us can't hear him above all the noise around us. Besides, we're so consumed with all the worries of life; we've lost our job, or the car needs repairs and we can't afford to pay for them, or we just learned that we have an incurable disease, or a thousand other worries and cares that seem to just keep on coming. There is no way we are ever going to get out of this mess and God doesn't seem to care. So, instead of getting quiet and seeking to hear the quiet whisper, we just give up. We get to a point where we believe that we're helpless and hopeless and we're not ever going to get any better, so why try. Why put out all the effort? We're defeated!

But maybe things aren't going terrible for you right now. Perhaps, they're going pretty well, in spite of all the mask-wearing, social distancing, and political nonsense going on. You're actually pretty content with where you are in your Christian life today. After all, you're saved and you're going to heaven. You're never going to be a "super Christian," but you're good enough. You can just coast the rest of the way.

If either one of these scenarios describes your life today, or if you're somewhere in between, let me challenge you to find a quiet place. Pour out your heart to God and ask Him to help you hear the Spirit speaking to you. Then, open up your Bible and read. Then pray about what you just read. And the next day, do the same thing. And the day after that, and the day after that ... Your objective is for you and God to be BFFs. Keep in mind that you don't become a best friend with someone who you only talk to once or twice a week. The key is spending LOTS of time together. Let that be your primary objective, spending lots of time with God. I can guarantee you that if you spend a lot of quality time with God, you WILL hear His Spirit speaking to you. And – without realizing it, you will be walking in step with His Spirit.

Let's pray.

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