



WALK BY THE SPIRIT

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Slavery—its horrors, its traumas, its indecency, its evil, its repercussions, its shame—has again become a hot button topic (as it must, until it is eradicated from the earth).

Oddly, and to the contempt of many, the subject is hardly addressed in this way by the book that is considered by over one-fourth of the world's population to be the truth about humanity's cause and purpose—the Bible.

The Bible never seeks directly to expunge this tragic affair from society. Instead, the Spirit of God has made it a painfully obvious and ever-present witness to a ubiquitous, and more pernicious, problem in human culture: the spiritual enslavement of the entire human race to self-righteous sin.

The writers of the Scriptures point to human enslavement as an illustration of the fallen condition of us all, and to its eradication as the result of the Holy Spirit's present activity among us—conquering both sin and slavery in a single blow, through the effect of Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave, applied by the Spirit as we grow closer to Him.

Let's see how this works, as we dive into one of the clearest Bible presentations of the subject in Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia—a region where Paul planted several churches during his first missionary journey through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Galatians 5:1-16

¹ It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

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

³ And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. ⁴ You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. 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. ¹¹ But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. ¹² I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.

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. ¹⁴ For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free.

How can I know and sustain the freedom Jesus brings in my day to day life? This is what Paul addressed in this marvelous passage. His insight to the human condition and the ways we wrestle with our responsibilities is nothing short of convicting and liberating.

Keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

The first issue we face is our own vacillation—still succumbing to sin, as though it is a power to be obeyed. THAT is the blindness of enslavement!

"Slavery" to the Law, to rules and rituals (though there is nothing inherently wrong with them) remains a tempting rabbit trail in our spiritual journey—almost a retreat from the more demanding path of listening intently and responsively to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. It turns out, instead, to be a quagmire in which we become stalled and stuck.

Instead, here is what's required of you: "Standing firm" in grace-through-faith.

If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

"Circumcision" represents the Jewish form of a general culture of dependent law-keeping.

The result is that the "Christ of the cross" will be of no benefit (cannot save you). Not because He is unable, but because you have rejected Him.

You may choose the "works of the law" or "faith in Christ," but not both.

Every man who receives circumcision... he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. ⁴ You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Going back to the "old religious ways" is inconsistent with following Christ. It is a departure from the path of grace that first brought us to safety and deliverance.

We through the Spirit, (this cannot be achieved on your own, not a product of flesh)

Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? Not the indwelling presence that comes with your new birth, but the enduement with power? You have followed Jesus into the water of baptism, but have you risen with Him into the power of the Spirit?

by faith, (by dependence, by reliance, by leaning, by listening)

But not leaning on rules. Not depending on obedience. Not measuring by behavior.

are waiting for (you cannot hurry it; it takes time—His time)

What do you do while you wait? You trust.

When you feel guilt, trust in Jesus' sacrifice

When you feel worry, trust His sovereignty

When you feel ashamed, trust His love

When you feel afraid, trust His power

When you feel confused, trust His wisdom

the hope of righteousness.

Righteousness is a Hope, promised by God, solid and sure. Wait for it. Trust Him for it. As you wait, walk by the Spirit, not by the Law.

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

We must have a "faith that works," not a faith that is idle. And faith doesn't work through pride, but through submission. Faith doesn't work through strength, but through weakness. Faith doesn't work through reason, but through obedience. Faith works through love—in submitted, dependent, obedience.

This is not the love of romantics, but the love of devoted service. That's faith. That's faithfulness. That's the story of the cross.

If I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.

The cross is a stumbling block to the person without the Spirit (the natural man), because it shatters religion and undoes our pretentious efforts to be religious. All else is worthless. Vain. Fruitless.

Reminds me of the lyrics of an old hymn:

At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the Light

And the burden of my heart rolled away

It was there by faith I received my sight

And now I am happy all the day

This is our freedom!

Paul's own life was a testament to this truth, as he wrote to the Philippians (3:7-9):

3:7 But whatever things were gain (religious assets) to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

The cross says, "Anything less than this is meaningless. All you have to offer is worthless."

Returning to such dependence on my efforts in earthly things is foolish and futile. Nothing of any earthly value comes close to the "surpassing value" of the death of Jesus on the cross in our place.

If we preach the human ways of pop-psychology and self-help, the world won't bother us. But if we preach Christ, crucified, risen from the dead, and crowned Lord of all, some people will be offended, because they are still unwilling to let go of their own efforts to impress God. They're not yet ready, like Paul, to trash their religiousness. Pray for them.

Read the lyrics of this song and observe the shift of faith's focus from religiousness to relationship with Jesus.

Losing My Religion

Jason Ingram, Lauren Daigle, Paul Mabury
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*I've been an actor on a stage
Playing a role I have to play
I'm getting tired it's safe to say
Living behind a masquerade*

*No more performing out of fear
I'm trying to keep my conscience clear
It all seems so insincere
I'd trade it all to meet You here*

*I'm losing my religion
I'm losing my religion*

*Light a match and watch it burn
To Your heart I will return*

*No one could love me like You do
Why would I want a substitute*

*I'm losing my religion
I'm losing my religion to find You*

*I'm losing my religion
And finding something new
'Cuz I need something different
And different looks like You*

*I'm losing my religion
I'm losing my religion to find You*

¹³ You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

You see, that's the trouble with freedom—maybe the only trouble—you're no longer subject to another person. You alone are responsible for how you use it.

To paraphrase a courtroom scene from the movie "A Few Good Men," people say, "I want freedom!" But we can't handle freedom on our own.

And if you spend your freedom on yourself, you won't be satisfied for long. You're bound for misery. Instead of spending it on pleasing our flesh, from which Jesus liberates us, we ought to spend it in loving service.

Many people don't know how to spend themselves in service to others, like the widow who gave "all that she had" in the Temple offering; instead, they are more like those who gave a pittance from their abundance and called it a kindness.

Paul warned them sharply:

¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, be careful that you are not consumed by one another.

Through policing. Through gossip. Through rancor. Through classism. Through ostracism. Through indifference.

Living without love is dangerous! Carnal flesh, even religious flesh, is not safe.

If you've been wounded in the church, I've no doubt it was the result of religious flesh, and not the prompting of the Spirit of Christ. And for that I am so, so sorry! On behalf of my wayward

brothers and sisters, who have treated you with such disregard, I apologize, and beg your forgiveness.

What must we do to be safe and to keep others safe? Follow the Holy Spirit's lead. When we fail to do this, someone (maybe everyone) will be injured.

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don't rely on your own understanding.

Or, as Paul said it here in Galatians 5:

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

Do you want to be safe? Do you want to be holy? Live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Don't cower before religious rules devised by people (not even your own), but have the courage to do as the Spirit tells you. Find the grace to humbly obey.

In this phenomenal passage, Paul has shown us the captivating power of sin and the resulting enslavement we experience through our base, fallen, unconverted nature.

He has also declared our ransom from slavery to sin, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, when we entrust ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

And he has mapped out for us, in broad terms, the path we must follow, if we hope to reach ultimate freedom: learn to love one another.

Don't dismiss or ignore each other (it's not enough to "not despise" each other). Don't settle for tolerating each other, or even liking each other from a distance. Instead, learn to actively and selflessly LOVE each other—serve each other's best interest by encouraging and helping, even when it's uncomfortable or difficult

This is not a path without hills and ditches and potholes, so be alert, and be determined to listen and follow Christ's Spirit.

This is a daily walk—and needs to be walked out each day, one day at a time, for the rest of our lives. But we can do this, because *"greater is He who is within you, than he who is in the world!"*

Will you walk with me?