

Galatians 5:2-12

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- [0 : 0 0] Welcome to Galatians chapter 5. It's found on page 974 in the Pew Bibles right in front of you. We're looking at today at Galatians chapter 5, verses 2 through 12.
- So reading together, Galatians chapter 5, starting at verse 2. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.
- I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law.
- You have fallen away from grace, for through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly await the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith, working through love.
- You are running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.
- [1 : 1 4] I 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. But if I, brother, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?
- In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. The Apostle Paul has some rather strong words in this passage.
- Both for the Galatian Christians and for his opponents. Verse 4, Paul warns the Galatian Christians that if they accept circumcision, they will be cut off from Christ.
- They will have fallen away from grace. A strong warning. As for Paul's opponents, who are advocating circumcision, Paul says in verse 10, they will bear the penalty.
- In other words, they will bear God's judgment. And then we have verse 12. One of those verses that if you're reading through Galatians with your seven-year-old, you aren't quite sure how to explain.
- [2 : 1 9] Surely a verse which would have been a bit shocking and perhaps offensive to Paul's opponents if they ever read it. Now for many of us, or for some of us, if we hear a religious teacher saying these kinds of things, threatening judgment and hell, and so forth, our first reaction might be to be skeptical of their message, or at least to be turned off by their style.
- And so we might be inclined to dismiss or ignore passages like these. Now speaking for myself, if every Sunday I had to choose some passage in the Bible that I wanted to preach on, and that I felt comfortable preaching on, there are some passages in the Bible that I probably would never ever choose.
- But you know, this is one reason why most of the time at Trinity, we preach through whole books of the Bible. It makes us preach on all kinds of passages that we might never be attracted to naturally.
- 2 Timothy 3.16 says, All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

And if this is true, then we cannot ignore or dismiss any verse in the Bible. All of Scripture is a gift from God to us, even the parts that may initially seem strange or offensive or hard to understand.

[3 : 43] I mean, think about it. If the Scriptures never challenged our preconceived notions, if they never graded against some of our cultural sensibilities, if they never seemed strange or foreign to us, then why would we think that they really came from God?

How would we know that they weren't simply the product of humans who thought like us? On the other hand, if Scripture is truly inspired by God, it will never be a mirror image of any human individual or any human culture, ancient or modern.

So we can expect that some of the Bible's message will resonate with us because we're created in God's image. God's made us for himself. But some of the Bible's message will challenge and offend us, and different parts may challenge and offend different people because we're not God.

And our ways and our thoughts aren't always naturally in line with his. You know, some people say, I'm willing to accept some parts of the Bible as God's Word, but not others.

I accept Jesus, but I don't like Paul. But you know, in this case, Jesus gave warnings that are at least as strong as what Paul gives.

[4 : 55] We read some of them earlier. Mark 9, 42-43.

Or some of Jesus' words to his opponents. Matthew 23. Jesus said these things.

Both Jesus and Paul give strong warnings, and we can't simply ignore them. So today I want to consider what is Paul, why does Paul give such a strong and potentially offensive warning to the Galatians?

What's the spiritual danger that Paul sees and that Paul's trying to warn them against? And at the end, what is the alternative? What is the spiritual benefit that Paul wants them to embrace and hold fast?

So first, let's look at what Paul is warning against. Now on the surface, Paul is warning them against being circumcised, getting circumcised. Verse 2. I say to you, if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

[6 : 30] I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision. He's obligated to keep the whole law. Paul's using courtroom language. As if he was speaking under oath, before a judge.

He's very serious in how he phrases this warning. If you accept circumcision, you will be cut off from Christ. Now this is actually the first time in Galatians that Paul has explicitly addressed this question of circumcision.

It was a very practical issue facing the Galatian Christians. Should we or should we not? But Paul's taken the first four chapters to lay the groundwork. To set the foundation.

To give them the big perspective. So first, he established his authority as an apostle. Sent from God. A messenger sent from Jesus Christ in chapters 1 and 2.

And then chapters 3 and 4. Establishing that we're, how we are justified before God. How we're brought into God's family. How we're accepted and declared righteous before God.

[7 : 31] Simply by faith in his son. In Jesus Christ. But now, having laid those foundation, he goes on to address this very practical concrete issue.

And he says, don't do it. Now you might think, why is Paul so worked up about a minor surgical operation? Circumcision might hurt for about a week.

Sort of like getting your wisdom teeth pulled. But then you'll be fine. Whatever. And in one sense, Paul agrees. Verse 6. Paul says, neither circumcision, in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.

He says the same thing. Chapter 6, verse 15. Paul himself had been circumcised. According to Jewish tradition, when he was eight days old. And when he became a follower of Jesus, he didn't try to surgically reverse his circumcision.

Surprisingly enough, there were a few Jewish males who did. In order to conform to Greek cultural norms. You know, in the Greek gymnasiums, so if you went to exercise in the Greek gymnasiums, all the men would exercise naked.

[8 : 34] And they would make fun of Jewish men for being circumcised. Because in Greek culture, they looked down on that. Now, Paul doesn't have a problem with the physical act of circumcision.

It's the spiritual significance of circumcision that Paul is concerned about here. See, the Gentile Christians in Galatia had no cultural tradition, no medical reason to be circumcised.

The only reason they would ever be circumcised was a religious conviction. It would indicate that they were accepting a Jewish religious framework. Now, what is this religious reason for circumcision?

Well, in the Old Testament, God commanded Abraham and his descendants, and all the males in his household, to be circumcised. As a sign of their allegiance to him. And under the Mosaic law, circumcision became a sign of being included, being part of the covenant that God had made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

You might ask, why circumcision? Is there any symbolic significance to that? Well, often, in the ancient world, the sign of a covenant symbolized the curses that applied if one didn't obey the covenant requirements.

[9 : 55] It's a little different than today. So today, when two people get married, they often exchange rings. Right? And people often say a ring is a sign of the unending love that these people have for one another, this husband and wife, right?

But in the ancient world, it was actually sort of the opposite. It was, so they would, we have examples from the ancient Near East, where two kings would make a treaty with each other.

And what they would do to seal their agreement, to seal their covenant, is they would cut an animal in half, and they'd walk between the pieces. And it was a way of saying, if I ever break my promise to you, may I become like this animal.

It was a solemn oath. It was like signing your name in blood. It was a vivid way of symbolizing a solemn oath.

And circumcision actually functioned in much the same way. One commentator writes, In the case of the Mosaic covenant, the cutting off of the flesh was a symbol that God would cut off a person, and perhaps also his descendants from the community of believers, if the covenant wasn't kept.

[11 : 07] So if you read Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, where God gives the law to the people of Israel, over and over, 27 times, he warns them, If anyone does not keep these laws, that person will be cut off from the assembly of Israel, from the people of God.

So it's a very serious sign. And that's why Paul says in verse 3, If you get circumcised, you're obligated to keep every single command in the law.

That's what it meant. And at the same time, you're calling down upon yourselves all the curses, all the punishments that God threatened, if the Israelites didn't obey.

But Paul says, If you do that, you're living as if Jesus had never come. You're seeking to be justified by your obedience to the law, instead of by Christ.

And it will never work. Paul says there's only one way to be made right with God. Through the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse 11, If I still preach circumcision, the offense of the cross has been removed.

[12 : 25] You might say, Well, why does Paul call the cross an offense? Well, you know, the message of the cross is offensive to our natural human pride and self-centeredness.

One pastor put it this way, the message of the cross is that you and I are more sinful and wicked than we ever dare to believe. Our sins were so bad that Jesus had to die in our place.

There was no other way that we could be forgiven and made right with God. F.F. Bruce says, The cross is an affront to all notions of self-pride and self-help.

If I myself can make some contribution to my status before God, even something so small as the acceptance of circumcision, then my self-esteem is uninjured. But the cross humbles us.

Because the cross says that we can, that nothing we do can wipe away our sin. Nothing we do can make us right with God. We can't make up for our sins by doing good works.

[13 : 29] That would be like trying to pay off the national debt by working overtime at Walmart. Or it would be like saying to a judge, Yes, I did commit murder, but I've paid my taxes for the last 20 years.

You know, if there were any other way for us to be forgiven of our sins, for us to be reconciled with God, surely God would have said so. If we could be made right with God by obeying a moral law or by performing certain rituals or even by killing an animal, surely God would have said so.

It would have been monstrous for God the Father to send Jesus his Son to die unnecessarily. It would have been foolish for Jesus the Son to willingly give his life for no purpose if there was some other way that we could be redeemed.

But Paul says Christ died for a purpose. Christ redeemed us. He freed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us in his death on the cross so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

That's Galatians chapter 3 verse 13 and 14. And in chapter 4 verse 5 Paul says Christ came to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as his children, as sons.

[14 : 54] So Paul's saying live in the reality that Christ has come. Christ has died and Christ is risen. Rely on him and you have every spiritual blessing.

You have right standing before God. Freedom from bondage to sin. Adoption as his child. God. And the fullness of God's spirit.

So Paul warns the Galatians don't follow any religious teacher who denies or undermines this message of the cross. No matter how persuasive they may seem.

Because through the cross of Jesus Christ you have every spiritual blessing. You have all that you need. Now it's likely that these teachers, the false teachers that Paul is warning against would have seemed very attractive to the Galatian Christians.

Think about it. Most of the Galatian Christians were from a pagan Gentile idol worshipping background. Paul had come. He had preached the gospel of Jesus. They had come to believe.

[15 : 56] But then he and he had stayed with them for a while to teach them. But then he had left. They might have felt like they were on their own now. A bunch of new Christians. We don't know the Bible very well.

Paul's left us. And then these guys come along. And they seem to know the Bible well. They're passionate and persuasive. They give a lot of attention to the Galatian Christians.

They say, Paul gave you stage one. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah. We're going to lead you to stage two. Life under the ancient traditions of Moses.

And so the Galatians might very well have thought, wow! This is God's providence. This must be God's provision for us. God must have sent these teachers. Paul left. These other guys have come.

They're going to lead us to the next level. They seem to know the Bible. They give us, they're willing to spend lots of time with us. They must be from God. But Paul says no.

[16 : 56] Verse 8, Paul says, this persuasion is not from the one who calls you. In other words, God did not send these teachers. Their message is not from God.

They're not leading you to the next level. They're leading you astray. Paul describes the influence of these teachers using three verbs. In verse 7, verse 10, and verse 12. In verse 7, he says, they hindered you from obeying the truth.

Or as another translation puts it, they cut in on you like a runner who cuts in front of another runner during a race to make him stumble and fall. Verse 10, he says, they're troubling you.

They're bothering you. They're distracting you. They're disturbing you. Making you anxious and fearful all over again. In verse 12, Paul uses an even stronger word.

He says, they unsettle you. And that word was used to describe someone who was leading an uprising, who was overthrowing a government, who was subverting a whole society.

[17 : 58] Paul's saying, they're unsettling you. They're not leading you to the next level as they claim they're throwing you off course. They say, you need to get circumcised in order to belong to God's family.

And on the surface, that might seem like a small thing, but you can't stop there because getting circumcised means that you're promising to obey all the laws in the Old Testament and then you're calling down all the curses that were threatened for those who disobeyed the law.

You're relying on yourself now instead of Christ. You're living as if Christ had never come. Verse 9, Paul says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

A little yeast spreads through the whole batch of dough. You know, you don't mix a little bit of yeast into a bunch of flour and expect that the yeast will just stay contained in a little corner.

No, it's going to make the whole loaf rise. It's going to change the whole consistency of the flour. You don't mix, and Paul says, you can't mix in a little bit of false teaching that undermines the message of the cross and expect a Christian church to stay healthy over time.

[19 : 16] Now, maybe you, like the Galatians, maybe you're a relatively new Christian. Maybe you've recently started following Jesus or recently come back to church. It's likely that at some point in your Christian journey, you will encounter teachers like those who came to Galatia.

They may be warm and welcoming. They may give you lots of attention. They may be able to quote several Bible verses. They may seem persuasive. And you might listen to them, and you might wonder, have I been missing something all along?

They might promise to lead you to the next level spiritually. But if they do not proclaim the message of the cross, of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, or if they add non-biblical teachings and requirements to it, do not follow them because they will only hinder, trouble, and unsettle you.

Paul warns the Galatian Christians against the influence of these teachers. And he also has some strong words for the teachers themselves. He says, the one who's troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

Most likely, Paul's referring to a leader among these teachers. Paul says, you know, it doesn't matter how prominent or well-respected they are. If they're leading you astray, if they're teaching false doctrines, they will one day face God's judgment.

[20 : 42] And then we have verse 12. What do we make of verse 12? Why does Paul say such a provocative thing? I wish they would emasculate themselves.

Is he, what's he saying? Well, some have tried to interpret Paul's statement metaphorically. Maybe he's simply wishing that his opponents would cut themselves off from the Christian community.

Well, yes, Paul probably wishes that too. But if he only wanted to say that, he could have said that using much less colorful language. The translation is basically accurate. On the other hand, Paul is not expecting his wish to be literally carried out.

He uses actually a verb tense for an unattainable wish. For a wish that he cannot fulfill. So Paul is not threatening to physically harm his opponents, and he's certainly not instructing the Galatians to physically harm them either.

What Paul is doing is he's using sarcasm and provocative language to highlight the seriousness of what is at stake. If the Galatians follow the advice of these false teachers, if they accept circumcision, they will be cutting themselves off from Christ.

[21 : 53] It's a matter of spiritual life and death. And so Paul says, I wish that these teachers who are leading you down a road that leads to spiritual destruction, I wish they would self-destruct before they take you with them.

I wish that in their zeal for circumcision that the knife would slip and that they would castrate themselves. And if they did do that, according to the Old Testament law, they would be excluded from God's people, according to Deuteronomy 23.1.

See, Paul loves the Galatians, and Paul loves the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ. He's like a mother bear roaring at a predator who is coming and threatening to harm her cubs and snatch them away.

Now, what can we learn from this verse? Well, we shouldn't be quick to resort to sarcasm or cutting remarks against anyone who disagrees with us. Paul does not often use this kind of language.

On the other hand, there is a time and place to use strong and even provocative language when serious issues are at stake. John Stott writes, Paul's sentiment sounds to our ears both coarse and malicious.

[23 : 02] But if we were as concerned for God's church and God's word as Paul was, we too might wish that false teachers would cease from the land.

See, behind its apparent harshness, Paul's warning is motivated by two things. His devotion to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his love for the Galatian Christians.

So for those of us here who are Christians, are we willing to warn or confront one another when necessary out of love? If you see another Christian heading into spiritual danger, the most loving thing to do is to warn them.

Paul had led many of these Galatians to faith in Jesus. It would have been unloving to them and dishonoring to Christ if he knew about this situation and simply did nothing out of fear that he might offend them if he said something harsh.

In my experience, warning another Christian is one of the hardest things to do well. There's always the danger of pride. Jesus says, take the log out of your own eye before you try to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

[24 : 09] And a few of us may have tendencies to warn too much, to be like an ambulance that has its siren on 24 hours a day wherever it goes around town, even when it doesn't need to have the siren on, even when it's 3 a.m. and nobody else is on the road.

Or some of us may tend to overreact to things that are truly minor and inconsequential. But most of the time, I think most of us are afraid to really warn anyone else at all.

We're afraid to ever turn on the siren, even if it's clear that a brother or sister in Christ is heading into spiritual danger, heading down a perilous track.

And so instead we make excuses. We say things like, well, they won't listen anyway, so it's not worth it. Or I just want to be their friend, so I don't want to offend them or push them away.

But the book of Proverbs says wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. We're looking at the book of Jeremiah this morning.

[25 : 17] Jeremiah says the false prophets say, peace, peace, where there is no peace. Paul takes the risk of potentially offending the Galatians for the sake of God's truth and for their ultimate well-being.

Paul warns the Galatians ultimately for their good and for the glory of God. But you know, Paul doesn't only warn them against spiritual dangers. He's not only putting up some strong guardrails against the side of the road to keep them from veering off a cliff.

He also points them ahead toward their destiny in Christ. He gives them a vision of what Christ is calling them to and the hope that they have in Christ.

In the midst of this strong warning, Paul gives them also a strong assurance that in Christ they have something far better than the law or anything else can ever give.

Verse 5, Paul says, through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. You know, Christian hope is not a vague or uncertain or unattainable wish.

[26 : 31] It's a confident expectation that what God has begun, he will one day complete. And Paul has that confidence. Paul says, by faith in Christ, by trusting in his work on the cross, you have been justified.

You have been made right with God. Your sins have been forgiven. You are adopted as God's child and God has sent his Holy Spirit into your hearts to assure you that you belong to him.

But he says that's only the beginning. Being a Christian in this world is sort of like being engaged and looking forward to your wedding day. Sort of like being in a long-distance relationship, a long-distance engagement, and you're longing for the day when you will finally be able to be together.

Of course, in our society, when two people are engaged, either one of them can break it off. That's always a possibility. But God will never break it off.

God will never break his relationship with his people. He will never change his mind. If he has justified you by grace through faith in Christ, if he has pronounced you righteous in Christ, if he's given you his spirit, it's a guarantee that one day at the final judgment, when God's verdicts are displayed publicly for the whole universe to see, he will say, you are righteous in Christ, you are mine, and I am yours forever.

[28 : 03] And he will publicly welcome you into the new heavens and the new earth, his kingdom, the home of righteousness. Paul gives a strong warning to the Galatians, but he has an even stronger confidence in Jesus.

Verse 10 even says, I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine. So one commentator says, it's not that Paul thinks the Galatians aren't really in danger, but he believes that the Lord is greater than the agitators and the false teachers.

You know, Paul does not say, I'm confident in you. I believe in you, that you're smart enough and strong enough to resist any temptation that might come your way. In fact, he doesn't believe that.

Paul says, I have confidence in the Lord, that the same Lord who called you out of slavery to pagan idols, the same Lord who enabled you to run a good race so far.

He is able to keep you from falling into the present danger and any future dangers that you will face. And this is why Paul warns them. Paul knows that as their spiritual father, the one who preached the gospel to them, as a brother in Christ who loves them, he has a responsibility to warn them against spiritual dangers.

[29 : 33] But Paul also trusts that his warning may be one of the very means that God uses to keep the Galatians from spiritual harm, to keep them for himself, for this life and for eternity.

So Christians, receive Paul's warning. Receive warnings from fellow believers. Do not reject them out of pride, but consider them in light of God's word.

Though a warning may at first feel painful or even offensive, it is a means of God's grace. It is the good shepherd guarding you with his rod and his staff, keeping you in his fold.

Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

Sometimes this, that doctrine is called the perseverance of the saints. That all who truly belong to Jesus will persevere to the end. But we might better describe it as the perseverance of God with the saints.

[30 : 49] It's only God's perseverance with us that enables us to persevere by faith in him. So maybe you're going through a trial that is worse than anything you've ever experienced.

And you wonder, will I ever make it through this? Have confidence in the Lord. Have confidence in the Lord who called you and who's brought you thus far.

He is able to keep you. Depend on him. There's a song that says, I almost let go. I almost gave up.

But God held me close. So I wouldn't let go. And I'm here today because God kept me. I'm alive today only because of his grace. His mercy kept me so I wouldn't let go.

Let's pray. The Lord is my shepherd.

[32 : 01] I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the good shepherd.

And we thank you for your warnings, for your rod and your staff that comfort us, that strengthen us, that protect us. So that one day we will dwell in your house forever.

We will be with you in the home of righteousness, the new heavens and the new earth that you will one day create. We pray that you would give us humility to listen to your warnings and heed them.

And that you would set our eyes on the future that you have set ahead, set for us. The future that we have as your children.

[33 : 12] Amen. We pray this in your name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.