

Adoption

The Obligations of Adoption: Liberty Not License

By [Dr. Ligon Duncan](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you turn with me to Galatians chapter 5, as we continue to work through the series that Derek began back in September on the doctrine of adoption.

Tonight we're going to be looking at the subject of what our adoption is to lead to in terms of living a life of holiness. And Derek has given us the title, "The Obligations of Adoption: Liberty Not License," and, of course, in that title he's implying for us a difference between Christian liberty and license: a freedom which is used to do what we please without regard for our concern for one another, our fulfillment of God's command of love, love to God and love to neighbor etc. And Paul is dealing with that situation here in Galatians chapter 5. Derek has already looked at this passage from a couple of different angles on other Wednesday evenings during the course of this study, but we're going to look at it asking this one question: What are we freed to by the work of Christ in salvation? What does Christ free us to and for? In this passage, Paul makes it clear that Christ in His redeeming work has set us free, and so we have to ask the question: what are we set free to? Or, what are we set free for? Or, to put it in another way, we might ask, what kind of freedom is Paul talking about here?

This can be a somewhat confusing passage and I want to try and give you a context for it, just walking you through Paul's line of argument from one to fifteen. Then, really I only want to zero in on two main truths and explain and apply those truths. The first truth we'll pick up and see Paul expand on and illustrate in verses 1 through 12. The second truth we'll see in verses 13 and 14 especially, but we'll be looking to 13 to 15 tonight. The first truth reminds us that we as Christians are set apart by virtue of faith in the cross of Christ, *not* Christ plus something else. So the freedom that is ours is ours through Christ and His cross received by faith, not through faith plus something else or Christ plus something else. That's the grand truth that Paul makes clear in verses 1 through 12. Then, in verses 13 and 14, he makes it clear, ironically, that we are freed to serve. We are free to serve. Those are the two things I want to drive home as we look at this passage tonight, but first we'll outline the passage, and then we'll look at those two points. Before we hear God's word read and proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His blessing.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word. It is Your truth. We know that Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. And so as we come to a passage of great importance but also some difficulty, we ask that by Your Spirit You would open our eyes to understand it; but more than simply understanding it, we pray, O Lord, that this truth would by Your Spirit be engrained into our hearts and would so transform us that we would walk in the truth and not simply know the notions of the truth. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word then in Galatians chapter 5 beginning in verse 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. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. 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. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Paul's point in this great passage is that Christ has bought us for freedom. He presses that truth home in the first 12 verses, and then he explains to us the kind of freedom that He's bought us for in verses 13 to 15. Let's walk through the argument tonight, because it's important for us to understand what Paul is saying that we have been freed from and what we have been freed to. Or, to put it this way, Paul is talking about a certain kind of freedom, not just any old freedom—not just, say, a freedom from responsibility or a freedom from norms but a freedom to a kind of life. And so it's important for us to understand the kind of freedom that Paul says that Christ has gained for us when He says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free." So let's walk through his argument and see if we can follow it

carefully in the language.

I. Christ bought us for freedom.

First of all, Paul states his fundamental thesis in verse 1: he says that Christ bought us for freedom. The language doesn't use the terminology of Christ buying or His redeeming, but it's implied even in the language of freedom. When one went to the market in the Roman world and bought a slave, that slave was being redeemed, he was being bought back from his servitude to another master, and you could, by rights as the owner, give that slave freedom. And so the New Testament language of redemption comes out of that setting: where someone is bought out of servitude, bought back from servitude and freed by his gracious savior and master. And Paul's point in verse one is, since Christ has bought you out of slavery, don't allow yourself to be re-enslaved by someone else. Since Christ has brought you into a marvelous freedom, don't allow yourself to be re-enslaved.

Well, how could one do this? How could one be re-enslaved? There are many ways that a person could do it, but Paul is dealing with a specific context here, and you see him address it immediately in verse 2. These people were facing a teaching which basically said to them, "Good. It's good to accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah, but in addition to accepting Jesus as Lord and Messiah, in order to believe, in order to be a Christian, one must keep the law of Moses" and particularly, the ceremonial law of Moses, and that meant being circumcised, following the dietary laws, and various other commands of the ceremonial code. And Paul in verse 2 argues very clearly that we as Christians are freed from the requirements of the old covenant ceremonial law. "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you." This is his way of saying, "Don't act as if you are bound to keep the ceremonial law of the Old Testament as the way in which, or a way or a part in which, your righteousness is established. Your righteousness is established by Christ. It is received graciously through faith. It's based on what Christ did not what on you did, and it is not required of you to keep the ceremonial law."

Now let's pause for a second and remember that Paul has two different approaches to dealing with old covenant ceremonial code in the New Testament. In some cases, when Paul is seeking to reach out to Jewish people, he will bend over backwards to observe certain Old Testament ordinances. But the minute that someone tells him he has to observe those ordinances, he'll say, "No I don't," and he'll make a show of it. So if it's simply a matter of avoiding offense and sensibility, he is perfectly willing to abide by those commandments; but the minute that someone says it is necessary for you to obey the code, he will make a public showing of the fact that we do not have to obey that ceremonial code. So, Paul is not being contradictory.

You remember that one of Paul's people who accompanied him on the missionary journey, Paul had circumcised; another he made a point of not circumcising. So when he says, "If you receive circumcision Christ is not of benefit of you," the point is not simply to receive circumcision; it's receiving circumcision because you think it's required, receiving circumcision because you believe that you are under a religious obligation to do this. And so Paul says here, we have been freed from the requirements of the old covenant ceremonial law.

Then in verse 3 he goes on to this part of his argument and he says, "Look, if you're going to trust in the old covenant ceremonial law, if your going to trust in circumcision to set you apart: to mark you out as part of the people of God, to indicate that you are a holy person, a follower of God, a follower of Christ—then you need to understand that you've got to keep the whole law. If the ceremonial law is going to be the thing that sets you apart, that makes you holy, then you can't just depend on obeying these outward acts of the ceremonial law; you've got to keep the whole law perfectly, because that's what Jesus did. He kept the whole law perfectly so that all those who trusted in Him were declared right with God because of His actual righteousness. And so if we are going to go the road of establishing our own righteousness, "Mere ritual observance," Paul says, "won't cut it. You've got to keep the whole law, perfectly." So Paul is making the point that if you're going to trust in ceremonial ritual law to make you holy, then you better keep the whole law.

Let me pause and say here that in the New Testament Christians faced various kinds of criticisms. From the Romans, they were sometimes confused with the Jews; they were sometimes accused of being superstitious. From the Jewish side, Christians were often told one of two things. Whoever wrote the book of Hebrews was writing to a Christian congregation, and someone was saying to that Christian congregation, "Look, you can have everything that you think that you have found in Christianity in this brand of Judaism. And if you'll just turn your back on Christ and come back to Judaism, you can have everything that you think you've gotten in Christianity and still hold onto your Jewish roots." And, of course, the author of Hebrews is saying to the Christians in that congregation, "Oh, no, you can't! And if you turn your back on Christ, you'll not only lose Christ and salvation, but you'll lose your Jewish roots too, because He's the fulfillment of everything that the whole religion of Israel was pointing to." And so the author of Hebrews argues against that argument being made against Christians.

Now the other kind of argument that Christians were given in the New Testament was by people who said, "No, it's not that we need to go back to Judaism, but it's that we need Christ plus the Mosaic ceremonial law. Christ plus the ceremonial law equals Christianity." And Paul says, "No, no, no, no. Christ plus the ceremonial law does NOT equal Christianity—it equals apostasy; it equals heresy. It's Christ; it's the cross of Christ alone; it's the grace of God alone and the cross of Christ alone received by faith alone that equals Christianity. And any plus to

that is a minus. Any addition to the righteousness of Christ actually denigrates the righteousness of Christ, and it's that which Paul is having to deal with here.

Whoever this individual is that he refers to in verse 8 and in verse 10 is teaching a "Christ plus" view of righteousness and Christianity. And Paul is saying here, "No, no, no, no, no, no! If you're going to say 'Christ plus the ceremonial law,' then you might as well make it 'Christ plus *the whole law*' because you're making your righteous standing based on you, or Christ *plus* you, instead of Christ alone." And Christ alone is the gospel that Paul is preaching. And Christ plus the ceremonial law is the false gospel that is being preached by the people that he calls the Judaizers. And so Paul's arguing against that.

Then, fourthly, he elaborates on this. Look at verse 4. He says, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." In other words, if you add to Christ you take away from Him. "Christ *plus* the ceremonial law for justification" does not equal Christianity; it equals apostasy and heresy. It's turning our backs upon the full and free redemption that is offered to us by God through the work of Jesus Christ!

You understand the logic: if you say that something needs to be added to Christ in order for you to be fully Christian, in order for you to be declared righteous, then you are saying that the righteousness of Christ was not enough. I, for one, do not want to stand before the judgment throne of God and announce to Him that His Son's righteousness was not enough for me, that there were some things that I needed to add to that in order to make it sufficient. It would be the height of arrogance as well as stupidity to do such a thing before the living God! And yet, unwittingly there are teachers teaching this to the Galatians. So Paul argues against them.

Now here's what he says positively in verse 5. He says that the Spirit, not the ceremonial law, is the dynamic of our Christian life. The Spirit is the one who sets us apart, not our keeping of the ceremonial code. "For we through the spirit by faith are waiting for the hope of righteousness." What was it that visibly set Israel apart from the nations? Well, in large measure it was the ceremonial law. Israel was called upon to wear funny clothes. Israel's males were called upon to wear their beards and hair, frankly, a little funny. There are some of them whom you can see today still wearing their hair in that fashion, and they still stand out. That was God's purpose, you understand, for them to stand out. So that when you walked into a marketplace you could say, "Ooop, there's a follower of Jehovah."

But Paul is saying, "That is no longer what marks us out. What marks us out is the Spirit, and what marks us out is faith alone in the Messiah alone, and the life that the Spirit brings is what is now going to mark us out from the nations." And, so, he makes the point here that we are justified by faith, not by the law, and we are set apart by the Spirit and not by the ceremonial law. In verse 6 he goes on to say this, "That the state of being circumcised or being uncircumcised no longer

has any religious significance for the Christian”—for the one living after Pentecost, for the one living in the new covenant—“for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything.” His point here is that the old covenant requirements have passed away; they’re not binding on the Christian anymore.

So what does matter? Well, he tells you in the second half of the verse. What matters? Faith working through love: that's what matters in the new covenant. Not circumcision, not uncircumcision, not the ceremonial law—but faith working through love. That's what's important.

Now in verse 7 he says, “You know once upon a time you seemed to understand this. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying this truth?” And so what he's saying is this: “You seemed to understand this; you seemed to embrace it; you seemed to be living like this. What happened? Who turned you around on this?” And then in verse 8 he says this, “This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you.” What's he saying? “This idea that you’re being taught doesn't come from God the Father. This idea is from the Old Liar because God the Father would never say, ‘Begin with Christ and finish with your works. Begin with Christ and add a little dash of the ceremonial law. Begin with Christ and add a little dash of your own faithfulness and those two things together will save you.’” No, the Father would never say that. The Father didn't send His Son to do a work that was unfinished. He sent His Son to complete a job, and, as I recall, among His Sons' last words were, “It is finished.” And so the apostle is saying here, “These people who are teaching you this didn't get this from God. In fact, whoever is teaching this, he isn't a Christian; he doesn't know the grace of Christ.”

In verse 9 he goes on to quote something that he's quoted before. He must have liked to repeat this expression. Years ago, I used to go out to lunch with Reed Miller, the former pastor of this congregation. And my first few years when I was in Jackson teaching at the seminary, we couldn't get through a lunch without Reed saying one of his famous, little aphorisms. And one of the ones that he always would say is, “Ligon, we don't want to be famous; we just want to be faithful.” And I could guarantee that somewhere in the lunch that statement was going to come up. Well, this must be one that Paul liked to say a lot: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” He says it in 1 Corinthians. He liked this statement. Jesus makes this point Himself. Well, Paul quotes this little statement from time to time. In other words, what he's saying in verse 9 is, “Beware allowing this kind of influence. It can mess up a whole church.” You allow one teacher to teach a congregation this, and it can mess up a whole church. Some of you don't know how relevant that is for us right now in Jackson, Mississippi.

In verse 10 he goes on to say this—it's a word of compliment to them—he says, “Look, I, I know you’re gonna come out right on this. I know you’re going to end up orthodox. I know you’re going to believe the right thing.” He says, “I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view. I know you’re

gonna be right on this. I know you're going to believe in salvation by grace alone and justification by faith alone, that you won't attempt to admix the ceremonial law with your justification. But..." he goes on to say in verse 10, "whoever is teaching you this, God is going to judge him. God is going to deal with him. He is going to be judged by Christ."

In verse 11 he says this, "But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished." In other words, he's saying, "The cross, you see, rules out all other ways of righteousness with God. If righteousness comes by the cross, then righteousness can't come in some other way unless you say that the cross was not enough." And that is something that God is not prepared to say. How could God have possibly justified giving His own Son if it was not enough? And how could we dare say of the gift of the heavenly Father of the infinitely precious and perfect Son of God, His life and death was not enough; that I, some paltry thing, that what I am going to do is going to add to that to make it sufficient? The thought itself is blasphemous! And so the apostle Paul says, "Look, if I were running around preaching circumcision as the thing that you needed to do for righteousness, I would be making the cross of naught, because the cross rules out all other ways of righteousness with God."

Now in verse 12 he says something very nasty about the people who are teaching this particular teaching. He did not mince words, and, boy, does he not mince words in verse 12...but I won't translate that for you.

II. The kind of freedom for which God intends us.

Let me skip on to the next part of his argument, the final part of his argument. Verse 13, he says, finally—he's been showing you what you are not called to; now he's going to show you what you're called to: "You're called"—to what kind of freedom?—"not to license but to liberty." You are called to freedom, but don't turn your freedom into an opportunity of the flesh, but through love serve one another. You see, he's saying that you're freed to serve. Isn't that interesting? It's the reverse of the way we normally think. Indentured servants served in order to be freed. Christ people are freed in order to serve. That's why the image of the bondservant, the permanent servant, is one of the favorite images of the Christian in the New Testament. And it is also one of the most freeing images because you're freed from self; you're freed from the eternal search and quest of self-justification to give yourself away in service to one another. That's how the Christian fulfills the law: not by keeping the ceremonial code but by living to serve. And he concludes in verse 15 by saying that if we fail to love, then we are contradicting to our own calling and our freedom, because we've been freed to serve one another.

III. Application

Now that I've outlined the passage, let me make my two points. In this chapter, Paul makes it clear that we are freed by what Christ has done, *not* by what Christ has done *plus* something that we do. In this case it was people who believed that we were freed by Christ plus the keeping of the ceremonial code. In our case, it may be somebody who thinks, "Well, you're not a real Christian until you experience the second blessing of the Holy Spirit. You're not a real Christian until you speak in tongues. You're not a real Christian until by faithfulness you persevere." Whatever "Christ plus" is in your theology, it is a denigration of the fullness of the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

I have a Lutheran friend who ends every email he sends me with this final salutation: "Covered by the completely sufficient, imputed righteousness of Christ." Bless his Lutheran heart! He's got it just right. He's covered by the completely sufficient, imputed righteousness of Christ. His righteousness does not add one whit to his right standing before God. We are freed by Christ's work, *not* by Christ *plus* something else. That's Paul's first point.

But the second point is this: We are freed to servitude and it's the most freeing servitude that anyone could possibly experience. And that servitude is the servitude of loving one another. Now that's hard. You know, it's easy to serve one another when you're being nice to one another. But we don't live in a world where even Christians are always nice to one another. You know, there is no doubt in this room tonight, in this gathering of Christians—what? 100, 200 folks? There are folks in here who've let you down. There are folks in here who have hurt your feelings. There may be folks here who've really wronged you deeply...and you've been freed to love them. And that's not something for the faint of heart. Only the Spirit can engender that kind of love. And Paul is saying it is that kind of love that marks us and sets us apart in the world. It's not wearing funny clothes. It's not wearing our hair funny. It's not obeying certain ritual laws. It's people loving one another, or the others who break their hearts, who show that the Spirit indwells them as the temple of the Lord, in this crazy world.

You know, doesn't it remind you of something that Jesus said in the upper room? "They will know you are My disciples when you love one another." You see that's exactly what Paul is getting to here. The thing that makes us different is not the ceremonial law; it's the Spirit working faith by love that makes us different in this world. We've been freed: freed from bondage to the ceremonial law, freed from bondage to sin, freed from bondage to our own quest to justify ourselves. We've been freed to love one another, and by that loving one another, we will be unmistakably seen to be the Spirit indwelled people of God even by the world, Jesus and Paul both say. May God enable us to live that way together. Let's pray.

Lord, what a glorious freedom You have set us free to, and how far short do we

fall from that liberty. Sometimes we use that liberty as an excuse for license. Forgive us. Sometimes we use that liberty without a thought for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. By Your Spirit cause us to live up to this reality which is already ours in Christ. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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