

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	27		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 5:1-12		
Date:	September 20, 2026 (a.m.)		

FALLEN FROM GRACE

You have fallen from grace, is a phrase that has caused no little confusion in the minds of many Christians. Large numbers of Christians have been taught that this means that believers may actually lose their salvation. Let's be clear here. Is it possible for a truly born again believer to lose his justification? Norman Shepherd and his followers, in what is called *The Federal Vision*, teach that justification is by faithfulness and as such it can be lost. Three observations: *First*, according to them, in the final and ultimate justification our personal obedience and conformity to godliness (as seen in our character and conduct = good works) is a determining factor in our vindication in God's eyes. But Paul says God *only* justifies the ungodly (v. 5) not people who (with the help of the Holy Spirit) make themselves godly. *Second*, belief, according to Paul, is equated with *trusting* and not with our efforts to be obedient (a work). Therefore the claim that faith is to be understood as faithful obedience is to be rejected. Obedience is a fruit of faith, but as we have established throughout this series, obedience is not a synonym for faith. *Third*, note the word *never* (Romans 4:6-8) in the NIV (the ESV has *will not*) of verse 8. Justification for the Apostle Paul included a *total* and *complete* forgiveness. In Shepherd's theology this justification can be lost and as such the *never* is negated. As the late Jim Boice correctly noted, "Never means never, and it must be taken at full value here, even though the opposite is almost always the case in human relationships. We all know the kind of forgiveness in which a person reluctantly accepts our apology and says that he will forgive us. But we know as he says this that he is not forgetting what happened, that our offense will linger in his mind and will probably be brought out against us in the future. Parents have a way of doing this with their children, never forgetting some foolish action they did years ago and periodically reminding them of it. We adults do it with one another, and it is harmful. This text tells us that God is not like that. It tells us that once he has forgiven us for our sin through the work of Christ, he will *never, never* bring it up to us again. He will not bring it up in this life; never remind us of something in the past. He will always begin with us precisely where we are in the present. And he will never bring it up at the Day of Judgment. Why? Because it is truly forgiven. It will *never* be remembered anymore."¹

Long before Shepherd claimed that *faith* in *sola fide* meant "faithful obedience" the 16th century heretical group known as the Socinians (they denied among other things the doctrine of the Trinity) put forth a similar thesis. John Owen addressed this error. "Concerning this faith and trust, it is earnestly pleaded by many that *obedience* is included in it; but as to the way and manner thereof, they variously express themselves. Socinus and those who follow him absolutely do make obedience to be the essential form of faith, which is denied by Episcopius. The Papists distinguish between faith *in-formed* and faith *formed* by charity; which comes to the same purpose, for both are built on this supposition – that there may be true evangelical faith (that which is required as our duty, and consequently is accepted of God, that may contain all in it which is comprised in the name and duty of faith) that may be without charity or obedience, and so be useless, for the Socinians do not make *obedience* to be the essence of faith absolutely, but as it justifieth. And so they plead unto this purpose, *faith without works is dead*. But to suppose that a dead faith, or that faith which is dead, is that faith which is required of us in the gospel in the way of duty, is a monstrous imagination."² All will grant that there are false professors who fall away from the faith and commit apostasy. But can a genuine Christian apostatize? You will often hear people speak of *eternal security* as implying that once a person

makes a profession of faith (signs on the dotted line a salvation contract with God) the deal is done – that person is now *saved* and “once saved always saved” becomes a motto. Regardless of the lifestyle that person leads, despite the fact that he or she may actually renounce Christianity, they are still *eternally secure*. Really? Don’t you believe it! The true Biblical doctrine was rightly referred to as *The Perseverance of the Saints*.³ True believers will, as the expression implies, persevere in the faith. They may stumble badly. They may go through periods of darkness, but they will not fall away completely from Christ. Well, then, what *does* Paul mean when he declares to the Galatians: “You have fallen from grace?”

I. ***THE APPEAL TO FREEDOM.*** Murray J. Harris has written, “the West idolizes three freedoms – freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement. What is more, people generally regard freedom and slavery as mutually exclusive opposites. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, develops a remarkable paradox – that the aim of spiritual freedom is to become enslaved. For Paul, conversion to Christ brought freedom on several fronts:

- Freedom from spiritual death (Col 2:13)
- Freedom from slavery to sin (Rom. 6:14-23; cf. John 8:34, 36)
- Freedom from bondage to the Mosaic law (Rom 7:4, 6)
- Freedom from people-pleasing (Gal. 1:10)
- Freedom from “self-pleasing” (2 Cor. 5:15)

But to be truly free *is* to be enslaved. The emancipated slave is not left without a master to whom allegiance may be given. Slavery *from* leads to slavery *for*.⁴ Christ did not set us free that we might become slaves again. Christianity is freedom, not bondage. But what does Paul mean when he uses the word *freedom*?

- A. ***Freedom from the Guilt of Sin.*** This freedom comes through the cross work of Christ (Romans 6:18-22).
- B. ***Freedom from the Law of Moses.*** This is Paul’s point in Galatians 3:24-25; 4:4-5. Believers are free from the Law. This does *not* mean that they are free to sin. They are not *over* the Law, but neither are they *under* the Law (4:21).

II. ***THE ARGUMENT AGAINST CIRCUMCISION.*** Note the imagery Paul uses – the yoke of bondage. The figure of a yoke is an apt metaphor for bondage, since an animal in a yoke has no alternative but to submit to the will of its master.⁵

- A. ***The Danger of False Doctrine.*** Why is Paul so concerned over the Galatians submitting to the rite of circumcision? Paul enunciates four reasons.
- B. ***Christ is of No Benefit.*** This must have come as a shock to the Galatians! Why would circumcision make Christ of no benefit to the Galatians? Because that would be relying on something else as a means of gaining acceptance before God.
- C. ***Obligated to Keep the Whole Law.*** Circumcision brings with it legal obligations. Note how this is stated in terms of alternatives. It is *either* wholly Christ *or the whole* law.
- D. ***Fallen from Grace.*** To submit to circumcision is to seek justification by works, and that severs one from Christ – thus to fall from grace.

NOTE: Could the Galatians become unjustified? Paul’s language will not allow this. He is simply saying that after having believed in Christ (as the Galatians did when Paul first preached the gospel to them), to turn away from Christ alone and faith alone is to turn to a legal method of gaining acceptance before God. Instead of relying on Christ, they were now relying on something else. Thus, they have fallen from grace. Any time we trust in our efforts (or feelings or whatever) as the grounds for God’s favor, we have fallen from grace.

- E. ***Excluded from Righteousness.*** Legality does not bring righteousness. You remember the character Mr. Legality from *The Pilgrim's Progress*? He was rightly referred to as a *cheat* and could never produce righteousness. It is faith in Christ *only* that saves. The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone is incompatible with *any* attempt to *add* any kind of work – be it submission to a rite or the addition of personal faithfulness.

III. ***THE ADMONITION AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS: (5:7-8).*** Having exposed the nature of false doctrine, Paul now exposes the true character of false teachers. They had detoured the Galatians. Paul now reveals them for what they really are.

- A. ***They Hinder the Truth.*** False teaching will always be detrimental. Note how it takes only a *little* bit of false doctrine to corrupt.
- B. ***They Are Not of God.*** They are, in fact, ungodly, and Paul does not hesitate to say so!
- C. ***They Will Be Judged.*** Because the Judaizers were seeking to displace Christ (although they would have claimed otherwise), the Apostle declares that God will judge them.

NOTE: One of the characteristics of false teachers is that they oppose the truth, and they mean that they will aggressively persecute true teachers like Paul. The Church today is full of arrogant, self-proclaimed (and infallible) teachers. “Christian” television (most of it is anything but Christian) is overrun with false teachers who claim divine inspiration for their teachings. This is not new. Calvin wrote over four hundred years ago: “It is an illusory belief of the Enthusiasts that those who keep reading Scripture or hearing the Word are children, as if no one were spiritual unless he scorned doctrine. In their pride, therefore, they despise the ministry of men, and even Scripture itself, in order to attain the Spirit. They then proudly try to peddle all the delusions that Satan suggests to them as secret revelations of the Spirit. Such are the Libertines and frenzied individuals like them. The more ignorant a man is, the greater the pride with which he is bloated and puffed up.”⁶

Paul’s final words in verse 12 may strike us as coarse, but it expresses his utter contempt for the pernicious teaching the Judaizers had introduced in the Galatian churches.

CONCLUSION: We have freedom in Christ. We are no longer under the bondage of seeking to merit God’s favor. We could never earn salvation by ourselves. We are truly free in the real sense of the Word when we trust only in Christ. This is how Spurgeon put it: “What is the heresy of Rome, but the addition of something to the perfect merits of Jesus Christ – the bringing in of the works of the flesh, to assist in our justification? And what is the heresy of Arminianism but the addition of something to the work of the Redeemer? Every heresy, if brought to the touchstone, will discover itself here. I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus. Such a gospel I abhor.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary I* (Baker, 1991), p. 451.

² *The Works of John Owen VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 67.

³ cf. The Fifth Head of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort.

⁴ M. J. Harris, *Navigating Tough Texts: A Guide to Problem Passages in the New Testament* (Lexham Press, 2020), p. 160.

⁵ “It is significant,” writes Donald Guthrie, “that Jesus used the same word for the submission of his followers to him (Matthew 11:29). Not all yokes chafe, but the Judaizers’ yoke could only be described as slavery, very different from that of Christ.”

⁶ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 377.

⁷ Available at <http://www.spurgeon.org/calvinis.htm>