

Study: Galatians 5:1-12—Don't Just Do Something - Stand There!

Read to the Group: Slavery has a long and sordid history in the United States and elsewhere. In this week's study we will talk about freedom and slavery as metaphors for what our life is like with and without Christ. This is not being done to diminish the evils of slavery, but to highlight the great work that Christ has done on our behalf.

Opening

Ask the Group: The word "freedom" means different things to different people. When you hear the word "freedom," what images or ideas come to mind and why?

Read as a group or individually.

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!
(Galatians 5:1-12 ESV)

FREEDOM!

Ask the Group: When have you felt most free in your life?

Possible Answers: Moving out of parents' house, after getting married, in job that aligned with talents, etc.

Ask the Group: Paul begins by challenging the Galatians to not submit again to a yoke of slavery - implying that before they were Christians they were somehow enslaved. Think back to when you became a Christian. What aspects of freedom in Christ were most significant to you?

Leaders Note: The answers to this question will be both diverse and personal. Your group may need some time to think about this question. Typical answers to this question may center around not needing to worry about being accepted by God, being freed from guilt of past sins, or no longer feeling a need to perform.

Stand Firm

Ask the Group: In verse one Paul's exhortation to the Galatians was not to take action, but to stand firm. Does this fit with your idea of freedom? How and how not?

- Is it easier for you to act or not act?

- How does your preference mesh with Paul's call to "stand firm" (i.e. in faith, to refrain from doing something)?

Leaders Note: Paul admonishes the Galatian Christians to stand firm. He does not admonish them to accomplish anything on their own (which is a common idea associated with freedom [e.g. free to be me, free to do as I please]). Many Christians may see Christianity from a missional perspective - that it is our job to represent Christ. While it is true that we are Christ's ambassadors, this is secondary to our relying on Him - our standing firm. The point of this group of questions is for you and your group to explore the need to stand firm in Christ (to trust in Him) as our primary responsibility.

On What We Stand

Divide into three groups. Have each group look at one of the scriptures below and share with the larger group:

- The truth in which we need to stand firm.
- What it looks like to stand firm in that truth.

Group One:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23, ESV)

Possible Answers: Standing firm in the truth of Romans 3:23 means not thinking that I am good on my own or that I can live up to God's desires. Standing firm in this may look like being willing to admit that I am not perfect and choosing to believe that I need God.

Group Two:

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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10, ESV)

Possible Answers: Standing firm in the truth of Ephesians 2:8-10 means acknowledging that we didn't do anything to deserve God's favor. The good things we do are because of what Christ did and not in order to get God to like us. The challenge is that what we do may look almost identical when we are trying to win God's favor or if we are doing good works because of what he has done. The difference is in our motivation.

Group Three:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, ESV)

Possible Answers: In addition to what we have already talked about in the previous verses, standing firm in the truth of John 3:16 means trusting that God will not send us to Hell but will provide access to Heaven. This may look like not being anxious about death or focusing on material possessions.

Ask the Group: Which of these truths resonates the most with you?

- What would it look like for you to stand firmly in that truth this week?

Nothing or Not?

Ask the Group: In verses two through four, Paul says that if you accept circumcision, then Christ is nothing for you and you are obligated to keep the whole law (the mosaic law). In verse six Paul seems to contradict himself and say that circumcision doesn't mean anything. How can both of these statements be true?

Possible Answers: What Paul is saying in verses two through six is that the physical act of circumcision is just that - a physical act. In and of itself it cannot do anything. If, however, it is undertaken as a means to please God, the person undergoing circumcision is effectively saying to God "God, look at me, I must be righteous to do this for you" and Paul is saying that if one undergoes circumcision for those reasons, they are trying to generate righteousness on their own apart from Christ and are, in the act of circumcision, denying Christ.

Ask the Group: What are some actions that people today do to try and prove to God that they are good (or do so that they can be good)? How do those actions deny the cross?

Possible Answers: Giving money, volunteering or leading a small group. They also include undertaking pilgrimages, saying prayers, celebrating holy days (this happens in both Christianity and in other religions.).

Did Paul Really Say That?

Ask the Group: Can you think of a time when you've shocked someone to make a point?

Ask the Group: In verse twelve Paul makes a shocking statement. He says, "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" Do you think that Paul really means this or is he using hyperbole to make his point?

Leaders Note: Yes, he is saying that he wishes that they would cut off their genitalia.

Possible Answers: Paul has used hyperbole elsewhere (see Romans 9:3) and it appears that he is using it here as well.

What was it that motivated Paul to make this statement?

Possible Answers: Paul's vehement words here speak to his ire at those who would try and detract from what Christ has done and derail the faith of those in Galatia. From The International Commentary on the New Testament, Galatians: "...the thought here is that of self-excommunication which the verb carries in the light of Dt. 23:1, which forbids any emasculated person to enter the assembly of the Lord: by desiring self-emasculation for the agitators Paul is wishing that they would shut themselves out of, and cease to trouble, the company of God's people."

- How can we respond when we hear or see people being led away from the true Gospel?

Possible Answers: Gentle/firm correction, pointing people to the truth, taking the time to answer questions and help them learn so that they are not easily led astray in the future, countering false teachers as appropriate. It's OK to feel righteous anger at someone's behavior when they are trying to lead others astray from the Gospel, but we need to weave the Gospel into the situation and protect ourselves from sinning from/in our anger.

Ask the Group: What is our community application of this passage?

Leader's Note: You may choose to create your own application question as a group based on your discussion, or highlight a question from this study.