Practical Applications (5:1-6:10)

In the third major section of the letter, Paul encourages the Galatians to act on the faith he is confident his proclamation of the gospel has awakened. The first verse sets the tone for this final section of the letter: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Paul’s encouragements to the Galatians offer the reader lots of material for discussion and application of the principles of Christian Freedom.

Stand fast in the Freedom Christ has won (5:1-15)

Given the fuss that the Judaizers were raising about circumcision, the thought may well have crossed the minds of the Galatians that it would be easier to just make this whole issue go away by getting circumcised and then moving on with life. Here Paul encourages the Galatians to stand up for the freedom they have in Christ. The heart of the issue isn’t the physical act of circumcision. In the New Testament era, Paul in no way intends to say that circumcision is inherently wrong. But if the Galatians should give in to the Judaizers, even if it was just a way of quieting them down, they would be doing great damage. Even if the person who chose to be circumcised just to get the Judaizers off his back had a perfect understanding of God’s salvation plan, the witness he would give to others, particularly those weaker in their faith and understanding, would be devastating. To give in to the Judaizers would be a silent show of support for their beliefs, and the gospel message would be undermined. Legalism is all or nothing. Allowing even a little of it in is enough to destroy the entire gospel message.

Worth noting in this section is Paul’s confidence expressed in verse ten that the gospel message will be effective and that the Galatian Christians will see things in the same way he does. When working with even the most stubborn appearing sinner, the power of the gospel has to be the foundation. It’s for that very reason that Paul structured this letter the way he did, keeping the focus off himself and on the gospel message alone. This very same power of the gospel message is the reason why Christian Freedom from the ceremonial law is such a critical issue for every Christian to understand. If Christian Freedom is misunderstood or misapplied, the very heart of the powerful gospel message is at risk.

Paul’s pastoral care for his people is also evident in this section of Galatians, particularly when one looks at the changing persons of the subjects of the sentences. Paul uses the second person when pointing out the errors of the Judaizers, but when proclaiming the truth, he is careful not to put himself on a different level than his readers. His use of the first person plural pronouns unites the faithful with their pastors in proclaiming and believing the gospel truth.

As with any activity Christians find themselves involved in, standing fast in Christian Freedom is properly carried out under the umbrella of love, and Paul closes this line of thought with that very idea. Most people would probably accept the saying, “the free man is the one who lives as he chooses.” Christian Freedom is a little different, and Paul’s final words on this thought found in verse 13 need to be carried in mind – Christian Freedom should be used to “serve one another in love.”

Walk in the spirit and not in the flesh (5:16-26)

To this point in the letter, Paul has discussed the legalistic side of Christian Freedom in great detail, and rightly so – it’s the error the Judaizers were promoting among the Galatian Christians. But it is possible for Christian Freedom to be abused in the other direction as well. Perhaps this temptation is seen most
clearly in the phrase “cheap grace,” coined by Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹ during his years of service in Nazi Germany. “Cheap grace” means using the gospel as a license to sin, thinking that it doesn’t matter too much because the sins will be forgiven anyway. Paul anticipates an accusation of preaching “cheap grace” from the Judaizers, so he inserts a few verses here comparing life ruled by faith with life ruled by the sinful nature.

**Restore those who fall, bearing one another’s burdens (6:1-10)**

How should the faithful Galatians approach the Judaizers and their erring brothers and sisters? Paul gives advice in this section that should be heeded by any Christian looking to apply God’s word to a someone caught in sin, and his advice has a great deal to do with the choices Christians have. As in the previous chapter, the general rule is loving concern for the weaknesses of others. Before the legalistic Judaizers, Paul instructed the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom and refuse to allow themselves to be forced into circumcision. Here, Paul encourages Christians to carry each other’s burdens with a spirit of humility – being kind and considerate to the other person’s struggles.

**Conclusion (6:11-18)**

Paul’s conclusion to his letter offers a brief restatement of the key points and closes with the benediction.

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¹ See posted document on “cheap grace”