

## The High Stakes Round – What Are You Betting On?

### Galatians 5:1-6 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. <sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup> For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. <sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Do you enjoy a trip to Wendover every now and again? Do you like making March Madness brackets and placing a little money on your predictions? Do you like to gamble?

Now, before you raise up your eye brow at me and say, “Pastor, it’s unchristian to gamble,” I want you to realize a couple of things. First of all, there is no “Thou shalt not gamble” passage in the Bible. What the Bible does warn about is the love of money being the root of all kinds of evil, that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, that greed is a sin, and that no one can serve both God and money – he will love only one and hate the other, but we can never love both wholeheartedly.

Instead of focusing on gambling as purely monetary wagers, think of it as hedging your bet, putting your hope in a certain kind of outcome that you can’t control. So, in a way, it’s a gamble for you to go up to your boss and ask for a raise. You don’t know the outcome going into the conversation, but you’re taking a chance in the hope that you might be successful in obtaining a raise, and you might feel like it’s a pretty likely outcome based on your experience, your work history, the company’s finances, and the last time you got a raise. It’s a gamble when you select your major in college because you don’t know if this is what you are going to want to do for the rest of your life but right now you are hoping to serve in this particular field that you’ve chosen. It’s a gamble to decide what you are and are not going to tell your parents or friends because you know that what you say will affect your reputation and how they view you. So, you carefully chose what to tell them hoping that you’ve made the best decision with the options available to you.

Some of the things we take chances on have higher stakes than others. Paul had to point this out to the Galatian Christians as they were sitting at the roulette table of life talking religion. They were gambling, being told to take a chance, to put it all on black or red, but they didn’t realize the stakes involved or the certainty of the outcome. They had this group of people called the Judaizers who were telling them that if they really wanted to be declared not guilty before God, to be justified before God, to have God render a verdict concerning them that their sins were not held against them, then they would have to be circumcised. And you can understand why the Galatian Christians would want to hedge their bet on circumcision. It’s a practice that goes back 2000 years to Father Abraham. All faithful Jewish males since Abraham leading up to this point in history had been circumcised. Why wouldn’t this be something that God still requires for us nowadays in order to receive his special blessing, to have him love us, to have him adopt us into his family, and to have him take our sins away? This seemed like a good, safe bet to get circumcised in order to be declared not guilty by God.

However, circumcision was just a sign of God’s one-sided covenant with Abraham and his people. It was an agreement that God would do all the work to bring all of his promises to completion regardless of what the other party (Abraham and his descendants) did. Circumcision was not an action that brought God’s love to them, that took away their sins, but rather it was a symbol to remind them what God had promised, namely that he would bring the Christ into the world through Abraham’s physical descendants and he, the Christ, would be a blessing to all nations and all people, that the Christ would take away the sins of the world.

So, Paul, as an apostle sent not from men nor by a man, but sent by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead (Galatians 1:1), told the Galatian Christians the outcome of placing their bet on the Judaizer’s teachings, on this act of circumcision. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.” (verse 2) If you hedge your bet on this, you will lose it all.

Why? Why will such a little thing like getting circumcised be a high stakes round of gambling? How could we lose it all by doing this? Paul answers that unspoken objection by writing, “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.” (verse 3) If you do this, if you get circumcised, then you are betting your entire eternal welfare on you keeping the whole law of God, every single last point of it.

While there's no group like the Judaizers telling us that we have to get circumcised in order to be declared not guilty by God, there are plenty of people urging us to place our bets on actions we take in order to get right with God. It's the person who says to be truly saved you must invite Jesus into your heart as if the action of this invitation will make you right with God. It's the person that says that the only way you know that you are saved is if you go to church as if the act of going to church is what makes you not guilty of your sins before God. It's the person who says that there are certain commands or certain ordinances or certain rites that you must do in order to be saved as in you have to do your part to be saved. It's the person who says you must go to a confessional booth in order to have your sins forgiven, that there is no forgiveness for you unless you verbally confess each and every single sin you have ever done. All of these people's statement, like the Judaizers, make justification before God something that you have to do, even it's just a little thing.

As soon as you place your bet for being declared not guilty of your sin before God on something that you do, then you are obligating yourself to keep the whole entire law of God. You can't skip a single command or a single rite or a single attitude. You can't miss a single mark or even have one impure or rebellious thought. You must be perfect. Because if you are not, if you miss just a single point, miss one Sunday of church, don't say the perfect prayer, have one negative thought about one person, accidentally forget an assignment or a bill due date, then you have failed. You lose. As James says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2:10) You can try all you want, but one mistake, one slip-up, means you have failed. You placed your bet on what you do, and it's a losing bet.

If we place our bets to be declared not guilty before God on something that we do, we have lost. As Paul says, "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." (verse 4) Place our bets on us, and we lose. Christ counts for nothing. His life, his sacrifice is meaningless because we are trying to do what he did, and we are then losers.

To be circumcised or not to be circumcised because of what the Judaizers were teaching was the high stakes round. This was hedging a spiritual bet with eternal consequences, and it was a losing bet "for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value." (verse 6a) You, Galatian Christians, placed your bet on Christ. You placed your chances and your hope of winning on the one true and only God who came down as a man and lived under the law to free us from the obligations of the law. He completed them. He obeyed the whole law. He did not do this to show us how to keep the law, but he kept it for us. He did this as our substitute. Because he is righteous, he gives that righteousness to us through faith. Faith is not a work. It's not something that we do or that we contribute to. It is a gift from God given by the Holy Spirit. Our hope is placed on Christ fulfilling the obligations of the law for us, what God has done for us. Christ has set us free!

When someone tells you about being forgiven by God, about being justified before God, being declared not guilty for your sins, and they tell you, "You just gotta do this. You just gotta go to church. You just gotta pray to have Christ come into your heart. You just gotta do this certain rite or this certain ritual," God says through Paul, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (verse 1) When someone points out your shortcomings as a follower of Christ, how you have not kept all of his laws, own your sin but also own the righteousness given to you by Christ. You tell that person, "I am forgiven. I am right with God because Christ obeyed the law for me in my place. I'm justified before God because of what he did for me and not because of anything I have done." When your own mind nags you and says, "Have you done enough for God?" you squash the devil's lie by pointing to Christ. You tell yourself, "Christ is my righteousness. It's not about what I have done; it's about what he has done. He has set me free from the law by keeping it for me. I am forgiven. I am justified before God, declared not guilty of my sin."

All of us, in a way, are gambling by trusting Christ and Christ alone as our righteousness before God. We are placing our hopeful bets on him and this is the high stakes round. This is for all the marbles. But at the same time, this isn't a bet left up to chance. The outcome is certain. Jesus' blood and righteousness covers over me. This is what I believe. This is why I serve him. This is why I strive to keep his commandments, not to be justified before God but for my faith, my trust, to express itself through my love for God and what he has done for me. As we place our trust in Christ and his righteousness that covers us, we aren't leaving our eternal stakes up to chance. We have placed a sure bet with a sure outcome that will not fail. Christ has set us free from the obligations of the law. We stand firm with Jesus as our righteousness before God. Amen.