

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

By Faith Alone

1. We have freedom from the slavery of the law
2. We have freedom from the curse of the law
3. We have freedom to serve others in love

Ever get a bird in your garage? What happens to the poor thing when you walk in? It tries to escape, but it can't. It flies back and forth until it sees an opening, but . . . Wham! It hits the glass at full speed. Dazed, it flies around some more, desperately trying to find escape only to see that same opening to blue sky. Again . . . Wham! Over and over it keeps banging into that invisible piece of glass until it can't fly anymore.

Like a bird trapped in the garage, Martin Luther was trapped by his own sin and guilt. Only knowing God's justice against sin, he lived in the darkness of fear of God and nothing he tried seemed to help. The church pointed him to windows of good works, holy orders, and pilgrimage. But every time he flew to one of these openings, he smacked his head against the wall of guilt and fear, going nowhere. Knocked back by his sinfulness he could never escape to stand in the beauty of God's love.

Then one night as he studied Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther finally made sense of the phrase, "righteousness of God". Luther had always understood that to mean the righteousness that is God, the righteousness that we must measure up to or else. But that night he finally understood that Paul was talking about the righteousness which God gives in the gospel through faith in Christ. Luther described it as the gates of heaven being flung open to him. Like opening the garage door to let the bird out of your garage, no longer was he trapped by his own sin and guilt. No longer was he living in fear of a holy God. Now he knew that in love God had wiped away his sins through the blood of Christ. Now he understood that through faith alone he received Christ's righteousness as his own. He was free. By Faith Alone.

This freedom was under attack in Galatia. False teachers had infiltrated the church there, teaching that faith wasn't enough. To be a real Christian you needed more. You needed to accept the Old Testament rules for living. You needed circumcision, Sabbath keeping and dietary rules. Did you hear what Paul called this? *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 called it a yoke. You know what that is? It's a heavy wooden brace that is put on the necks of a pair of oxen so they can pull the wagon or plow together. A yoke was heavy and a burden. A yoke took away the animal's freedom.

By saying that they had to do something to be real Christians, these false teachers were trapping the bird in the garage all over again. They were directing people to rely on their works for salvation. They were taking away their freedom. We call it legalism: thinking there are things we must do, if we are going to be saved.

Legalism is thinking that living a certain way makes us Christians. Legalism is making church or baptism or the Lord's Supper into an obligation we must do to be considered Christian. Any time we are trying to do something to help with our salvation, legalism is threatening our freedom. It enslaves us again in guilt and fear.

Another threat to our freedom in Christ is self-righteousness, that is, looking for evidence in ourselves that we are right with God. We compare ourselves with others and look for our assurance that we are right with God because we are better than others. Or we point to those vices that we avoid and find assurance that we are saved because we don't do those things. Do we give up something for Lent thinking that makes us better Christians? Another sign of self-righteousness is when we look for assurance in things like speaking in tongues, a grand emotional experience or a decision for Christ. These are all just ways that we are trying to find assurance for our salvation in ourselves or in some event, rather than in Christ.

These attacks on our freedom in Christ are truly dangerous. *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.* "Alienated from Christ" can also be translated, "Christ means nothing to you." If you think that mowing your neighbor's lawn or volunteering at the hospital helps you get to heaven,

Christ means nothing to you. He does you no good. If you look for assurance of your salvation in your decision or your experience, Christ will mean nothing to you. If you live an unrepentant sinful lifestyle, you can claim you are a Christian all you want, but Christ means nothing to you; he does you no good. *You have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

You have fallen away from grace. Any time we rely on our goodness or anything we do; we are not just burdened with a slavery again to the law. We are burdened with the curse of the law. We lose grace. We lose salvation. We stand condemned all over again.

The freedom we have of being saved by faith alone is under attack. Defend that freedom. *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.* "Stand firm" does not mean do it once. It means, stand firm all the time. A defensive lineman in football can't make a stand on just one play. He has to make a stand every play. If he doesn't, he risks looking like the Denver Bronco defense and losing the game. "Stand firm" must become a lifestyle for us.

"In the Battle of Dunkirk . . . 330,000 troops stood with the German army in front of them and the sea behind them. No one had to tell those soldiers what was required of them. They had to stand their ground and fight. Retreat was impossible and surrender was unthinkable. Only when the ships arrived to take them home could they rest from the terrible fight." (Meditations Vol. 38, no. 3, p. 52)

Retreat and surrender are not options for us, either. Stand firm. How do we do that? First of all, know the truth. Understand the freedom that we have in Christ. Believe in the righteousness that Christ has already won for us. Spend so much time in the gospel that you can't be confused by the various attacks against it.

Second, don't just know what you believe, but why. Know it so well that you can give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Our Lutheran heritage has been preserved to us, humanly speaking, because Luther and his associates took the time to study God's word well and put their faith into confessions. Those confessions have preserved and promoted Christian freedom for five hundred years. In this way, let us hold on to the freedom of the gospel, the freedom preserved by the Reformation, the freedom of salvation by faith alone.

But faith is never alone. *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* Faith is never alone, because true faith will express itself in love. Martin Luther said, "It is true that faith alone justifies, without works; but I am speaking about genuine faith, which, after it has justified, will not go to sleep but is active through love. As I have said, therefore, Paul is describing the whole of the Christian life in this passage: inwardly it is faith toward God, and outwardly it is love or works toward one's neighbor." (Luther's Works, Vol. 27, p. 30)

By faith alone we are free from slavery to the law and the curse of the law. We are also free to serve others in love. Just think if we all would consider it freedom to serve others. Your siblings would not think you a pest to have around during summer vacation. Your husband would never groan or roll his eyes when you said you wanted to sit down and talk. By faith alone we are free from working out our own salvation so that we can concentrate on serving others in love.

On this Reformation Sunday, let us stand firm in that freedom. Hear the announcement of forgiveness in Christ. Look at the baptismal font and see all our sins washed away. Taste and eat that forgiveness in the body and blood of your Savior. No longer are we trapped like a bird in fear of God, banging our heads on the walls of guilt and shame. Jesus has opened the door to heaven. We are free to soar on his amazing grace. By faith alone.