



Free in Christ Slave in Christ

by Rev. Donavon L. Riley

Dr. Luther taught that in relation to God, the struggle and affliction we old Adam sinners suffer in relation to God's Word of Law is already addressed and resolved in Christ Jesus.

In relation to Christ, the Law's demands are shut up. As Christians, the Gospel announces that we are now free from the Law's accusations and condemnation because we have fulfilled the whole Law through faith in Christ (Romans 3:31). We are wholly and completely free. On the other hand, we are not free to live only for ourselves. Instead, Jesus sets us free to love our neighbor. In this way, through faith in Christ, we forget ourselves and live for our neighbor.

In relation to our neighbor, God's Word of Law teaches us what our neighbor needs from us for their good. In this way, Christians are wholly and completely bound to their neighbor by selfless love. Therefore, as Dr. Luther taught, a Christian is completely free through faith from the accusations and condemnation of the Law for Christ's sake, and at the same time a Christian is completely bound to his neighbor in love.

Of course, this makes us nervous. If God does not demand that we obey His Word of Law, because that demand has already been satisfied by Christ, why bother with the Ten Commandments at all? It made Luther's peers and students nervous, too. Many people asked him, "If it's not necessary to keep the commandments, then what's the point of good works?" The answer is, in relation to God, our good works are worthless and useless. But, in relation to our neighbor our good works are necessary and vital for his wellbeing. Because Jesus obeyed God's Word of Law for us, we do not have to wring our hands worrying about whether we have done enough or too little to satisfy God's commands. But, once we are clear of this, God does not set us free to run amok, chasing after every desire and craving. Instead, God sets us free to serve our neighbor, and there are many, many things our neighbor needs us to do to help him.

When we are freed by the Gospel from worrying about which works are good, which are bad, which work is selfishly motivated and which is not, we do not have to keep trying to make God happy with us (He already is), and we can stop using our neighbor as an opportunity to score points with the Almighty. Because He saves us by grace alone, God reveals to us that everything is gift from our Giver God. Even, and especially, the Ten Commandments are now revealed to us for what they are in fact: pure gift. The gift of the Commandments reveals to us that the commands are not demanding our works in order that we may be saved, but that as far as our neighbor goes, God has already "prepared good works in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). What great news! We do not even have to worry about good works. Our heavenly Father has already taken care of that, too. He will work in and through us to produce "fruit of the Spirit" which love and serve our neighbor.

This leads us back to Dr. Luther,

who explains in his Commentary on Psalm 147 "All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government—to what does it all amount before God except child's play, by means of which God is pleased to give His gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which he wants to be hidden and to do all things." In short, when we are living out our vocations, we are masks of God. He is working through us for the betterment of our neighbor.

We are to live in Christ through faith, which means we receive all things, especially our neighbor, as gift. All people are now evident to us as creatures of God, and more important than that, as someone for whom Jesus bled and died. We hear the Gospel promise, which we have done nothing to earn or deserve. Then the God's Word of Law is a promise, that God will be our God and we will be His people. The Commandments outline in brief how God will uphold and maintain the relationship. How the commands are enacted in our vocations is the living, breathing reality of that relationship.

Finally, then, the Commandments do not contribute anything to our salvation. Jesus alone does that. However, that does not mean they are done away with because we have heard the Gospel. The fact is, we need God's Word of Law to curb and restrain sin, to show us our need for a Savior, and to teach us what is needed to put the old Adam to death. Jesus completely obeys and fulfills the Law's demands for us, so that we can stop worrying about whether we are on God's good side or not. Now that we are free of that, free from having to earn God's favor, free from competing with other Christians for God's attention, we can bind ourselves to our neighbor for our neighbor's sake.

God does not need anything from us. He ran the universe just fine for a long time before we came on the

scene. It is only our sinful arrogance that imagines God needs our time, money, and talents to keep creation running smoothly. Our Christian calling is to enjoy our Baptism and be faithful, loving, and kind to others in our earthly vocations. This is why Jesus taught that God's Word of Law was not given for us to obey and impress God, but for the sake of our neighbor, to help and gift them. The religious leaders, on the other hand, taught that the Law's purpose was that it is better to do something that qualifies as "religious" rather than do something that is selfless, and only done for the sake of our neighbor, no matter how nasty, ugly, or sinful it may appear to others.

Christ lives in us through faith. Therefore, all that He has done, we have done. All that we have not done, He has already forgiven. And since He lives in us through faith, all our good works are done by Him in and through us. The gifts and good works we give to our neighbor are fruits of Christ's Spirit who lives and dwells and works in us through His gifts of Baptism, forgiveness of sin, the Gospel, and the Lord's Supper. So, in the end, if we want to do good works—or faithfully live out our vocations—we do not need more information or motivation. We need more forgiveness of sin and more Jesus in us. This is why Dr. Luther taught that in relation to Jesus, God's Word of Law is shut up. yet, in relation to our neighbor, God's Word of Law teaches us what good works our neighbor needs to support and protect his body and life. It's all Jesus, all gift, by which He lives and breathes and has His being in and through us and by which He does all good things for us.

Rev. Donavon Riley is the pastor of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Webster, Minnesota. He is also the online content manager for Higher Things. You can contact him at elleon713@gmail.com

