

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Festival of the Reformation*
Service Theme: *The Truth Will Set You Free*

Sermon Theme: Childlike? The Freedom of the Christian
October 30, 2022 Galatians 5:1-6

Imagine you went downtown yesterday for the Florida-Georgia game and asked 100 random fans, “What’s the message of the Bible?” What do you think most would say? I’d guess a majority would answer something like, ***“The Bible is a rule book that tells us what we should and shouldn’t do so we can live a good life.”***

And I have a sneaking suspicion that if you asked that question not to fans at a football game, but to worshipers at different Christian churches—maybe in our church too-- many would answer the same way. Because both inside and outside the church, there’s a prevalent idea that Christianity is all about morality—following God’s rules and being a good person.

And because of that assumption, if you told someone that Christianity is all about freedom, you’d probably receive puzzled looks or laughter. Because most people define freedom like the dictionary does: ***“The right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.”*** If people assume the Bible is all about following the rules, then Christians must all be unthinking slaves, robbed of freedom in their Biblical straitjackets decorated with little crosses.

But in today’s Gospel, Jesus says, ***“If you hold to my teaching...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** To understand that, we have to push back on those prevalent assumptions about the main message of the Bible, and what it means to be truly free.

We’ll do that as we discuss part of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christian churches in Galatia. Paul planted these churches in what is now Turkey, as he proclaimed the truth of Jesus as Savior during his

first missionary journey. But after Paul left, those Gentile Christians came under attack. Some Jewish converts to Christianity were trying to convince them that to be saved, they needed more than faith in Jesus as Savior. They also needed to perform certain works of the ceremonial law God gave to govern Israel’s worship—things like Sabbath regulations, sacrifices, and especially circumcision. Basically, they were enforcing the idea of “Grace plus.” Jesus is good, but certain works were also necessary to be saved.

So Paul writes this emotionally charged letter to counteract the teachings of the so called “Judaizers,” pleading with the Galatians, ***“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.”*** “Jesus + works = salvation” wasn’t a neutral formula to Paul, because as he explains, trusting in “Jesus + Works” for salvation would mean people who’d been set free were going back into spiritual slavery.

You can feel Paul’s love and concern for these Christians as he writes, ***“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”*** But how does “Jesus + works = salvation” remove Jesus from the equation altogether?

First, understand that Paul isn’t condemning circumcision in general. He’s condemning circumcision motivated by the belief that circumcision was necessary for salvation. God commanded the Old Testament Israelites to practice ceremonial laws like circumcision as special, visible reminders that they were set apart as God’s people; as special, visible reminders that pointed them ahead to the Messiah God would send to save the world from sin. When Jesus came as Savior and fulfilled the purpose of those acts, he made them neutral-- neither commanded nor forbidden. But if the people still saw those works as necessary for salvation, that was a problem, because it harmed their trust in Jesus as Savior!

Think about it. If you trust in “Jesus + Works” to save you eternally, what are you saying? “Thanks for dying for me Jesus... I just don’t think it was enough.” “I heard you cry out, ***“It is finished!”*** after suffering hell on the cross for my sins, Jesus. I’m just not sure it really is finished unless I do stuff too.” That’s as much faith in ourselves as it’s faith in Jesus as Savior, right? When we try to justify ourselves by following the rules and being good enough, we’ve been alienated from Christ, telling him, “You’re not enough to save me, Jesus.” We’ve fallen away from grace, believing our salvation isn’t a gift of God’s undeserved love, but wages we’ve earned by our works.

Do you ever think that way? Maybe you’re thinking, “No way! Reformation Sunday, baby! Saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone! I’ve got my “Sola” socks on, and a Martin Luther tattoo!” But even card-carrying Lutherans get caught up in works-righteousness thinking. Ever felt so much guilt over something you’ve done that you have a hard time forgiving yourself or believing that God could still love you? Isn’t that saying to Jesus, “I’m just not sure you paid for that one.” Ever struggled to forgive someone who harmed you, because you feel like they haven’t earned your forgiveness? Ever experienced a hardship in life and thought, “How could God let this happen to me?” as if we’ve earned a trouble-free life from him? Doesn’t that stem from a subconscious belief in “grace plus”?

It's not surprising that we and so many others think that way. The sinful nature all people possess includes what theologians call the ***“opinio legis,”*** the innate idea that we can, and have to, do something to save ourselves. There’s a reason every world religion revolves around the same basic concept, just in different packaging: The Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. The 7 Pillars of Islam. The Karma System. The works-righteous requirements of Catholicism, Mormonism, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Every world religion claims a way to have a relationship with God by performing the works they tell you. Except one.

Only Christianity answers the question, “How do I get right with God?” not with a list of rules to check off and an encouragement to be

good enough, but by pointing to Jesus Christ. Only Christianity teaches it’s not about what you’ve done to make God love you, but about what God has done for you out of his love for you! That’s incredibly compelling evidence that Christianity isn’t made up by humans with an “opinio legis,” but is God’s truth!

Back to our original question, that’s why the Bible isn’t a big rule book that tells us how to be a good person. It’s the big story of God’s immeasurable grace and love in sending his Son to be the perfect person and our needed substitute to set us free from our slavery to sin!

As Paul reminds the Galatians, ***“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”*** As Jesus says in today’s Gospel, ***“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin....So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*** As Paul writes in Ephesians, ***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** As Paul writes in Romans, ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** The Bible makes clear that we’re not saved by our works, or even by Jesus + works. Rather, all who have faith in Christ alone have been set free. Free from the slavery of sin and our sinful desires. Free from guilt and shame. Free from eternal death. Free from fear of any evil spiritual or earthly forces. Free to live through Jesus, and for Jesus!

That’s why Paul pleads with the Galatians-- and us-- not to throw away freedom in Christ for the slavery of works! When I was a kid, my family owned an old baseball with a faded signature, Babe Ruth. But it bothered me how faded the signature was, so one day I took a black Sharpie and traced over the top of it to make it darker. Ok, not really. That story’s loosely based on The Sandlot. But if you believed me, your heart dropped didn’t it? Because me adding my Sharpie to the signature wouldn’t make it more valuable. It would make something priceless...worthless! Even worse if we try to make Jesus’ perfect substitution better by writing over it with trust in our own works.

Christ has set you free from slavery to sin, death, and hell! Don’t put the shackles back on by trusting in your works! Jesus has paid the debt

of your sin in full. It is finished! Don't doubt Jesus' promise and continue trying to make payments! That just plunges you deeper into slavery to sin. As Paul warns the Galatians, if you try to win salvation by the works of the law, you're ***"obligated to obey the whole law."*** Being an outwardly "good person" won't cut it, because our hearts are flawed by sin, and none of us can measure up to perfect obedience God requires.

That means trying to earn eternal life through your works is like trying to reach a destination by running on a treadmill. You can run non-stop for days at full speed, but you'll end up in the same place you started—condemned to eternal slavery in Hell. Burdened and enslaved by guilt and shame for not measuring up, exhausted and defeated by the perpetual hamster wheel of trying to be good enough. Either way, robbed of freedom.

That's why so many people are so broken, so lost, searching for something that will give them meaning, purpose, identity, and freedom in themselves or their actions, instead of in the only one who can set us free.

But friends, ***"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."*** So, live and rest in the eternal freedom that is yours not by "Jesus + works," but simply in Christ alone!

So does that mean Christians are free to do, think, or say whatever we want? No. Christianity isn't all about following the rules, and being good enough- it's about trusting in Jesus our Savior. But being a Christian doesn't give us freedom like the world defines freedom—doing and thinking whatever we want without limit or direction. As Christians set free by Christ, we seek to follow God's law. "See!" the critics say, "Biblical Straitjacket! Freedom gone!"

But Christianity doesn't restrict freedom. It helps us possess the kind of freedom we really need! By faith, the Gospel changes our attitude about following God's law from a "have to" burden to a "get to" freedom! We want to follow God's law in obedience and love, because of the undeserved love he's shown to us. As Paul tells the Galatians,

"In Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

Obedying God's law is our opportunity to put faith-filled appreciation for Jesus into practice as we show love to God and our neighbor! Freedom in the same vein as the saying, ***"Love what you do, and you'll never work a day in your life."***

Following God's laws is freedom, not restriction, in the same way that the bank of a pond is really freedom for a fish, not restriction. If the fish sought freedom by jumping out of the pond onto the grassy bank, he'd quickly discover that such "freedom" is actually destruction! In the same way, set free by Christ, we get to follow God's laws joyfully, because we know he's given them to us as borders to keep us in the kind of blessed life he's designed to serve our earthly, and eternal good!

That's why Martin Luther referred to Paul's letter to the Galatians as ***"my epistle, to which I am betrothed."*** Luther knew the exhaustion and hopelessness of trying to earn God's love through his good works when he was a Catholic monk. God used the book of Galatians to open Luther's eyes to the truth that he had been already been set free from slavery not by works, but through faith in Christ as his Savior. He knew the struggle of having people trying to force him to leave that freedom to go back into the slavery of works. He took Paul's encouragement to ***"stand firm"*** when he responded, ***"Here I Stand, I can do no other"*** as the Catholic church threatened to kill him if he didn't recant his Gospel writings that we are set free through faith in Christ.

As heirs of the Lutheran Reformation, brothers and sisters of our Savior Jesus Christ, we too can stand firm, living in that freedom for which Christ has set us free! That's what the Bible is all about.