

Nov 1, 2020—Reformation, Christ the Rock Lutheran Church

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 law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit 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.

Tuesday is a big day. Americans will choose their president, their representatives in congress and many other leaders. All the candidates promise freedom. Those who favor the policies of progressives, liberals or “the left” offer freedom from racism, poverty, the pandemic, environmental disaster, inequality. They think that higher taxes, more regulations are the way to win more freedom.

Those who favor the policies of conservatives, libertarians or “the right” offer freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to bear arms, freedom to start your own business, a school, or a church. They think less control, less regulation, and lower taxes are the way to win more freedom.

Through the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians in a small part of the Roman Empire called Galatia, God also speaks about freedom. He urges you to **Stand Firm in Your Freedom**. This is a much higher level of freedom than what the political left offer mind today. Concerning this freedom that God gives us, the Apostle writes, *“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”* (v 1).

It's freedom from slavery (1-4)

Years after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Apostle Paul went to a place called Galatia that was nearly as far north of Jerusalem as Yellowstone National Park is from us. He told the people there that Jesus was the Savior promised by God through the prophets of Israel for many centuries. Many of the Galatian people recognized their sins and turned to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation.

Then people from places like Jerusalem who also accepted Jesus as their Savior went to Galatia. They told the new Christians that Paul's message about Jesus Christ was not good enough. “Yes,” they said, “do accept that Jesus was the promised Savior. Trust in him, but... But you must also do something. You must live like us Jews at least by being circumcised. That was a rite performed on Jewish baby boys and sometimes on men during the many centuries when people were waiting for the promised Savior to come. Circumcision was just the first of many laws about how the Jewish people would worship God.

Paul is alarmed. He sends a letter to the church in Galatia urging them to trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Do not let people tell you that you must do things like being circumcised to be saved. He says: *“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”* (v 1). These laws given to Jewish believers before the Savior came helped prepare them for his arrival. Those people were not saved by keeping those special laws; they were saved through faith in the promised Savior; just as the Galatian Christians were saved no through faith alone in the Savior who had come.

Paul tells the Galatian Christians, *“You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace”* (4). If you accept the false teaching from the Jewish Christians and think you must keep certain laws to be justified and thereby right with God, you lose what Jesus

Christ earned for you. You lose salvation. You fall away from grace. You no longer trust in God's undeserved love for you. You lose that grace that by trusting in something you do. Then *"Christ will be of no value to you at all"* (v 2).

Paul warns these new Christians that they can't just pick out one of the hundreds of special laws God gave the Jews before Jesus Christ came to this world. They would have to obey *"the whole law"* (v 3). Page through the book of Leviticus when you return home (it's the 3rd book of the Bible). See the hundreds of laws about what food people could eat, what they could not eat, how priests should dress, how sacrifices should be offered, and on and on. It's a tremendous burden. The Jews who lived under those laws before Jesus Christ came never obeyed them fully. You wouldn't be able to obey them either. Worse you would focus on those laws and think that by obeying them you would be right with God. You will lose the salvation Jesus earned for you. You will become slaves again—slaves like oxen who drag a heavy yoke over their shoulders to plow a field.

That kind of slavery appeared in a different way 500 years ago in Germany. The Christians were no longer thinking they had to be circumcised to become right with God and have salvation. But the basic idea of having to do something to earn salvation still troubled them. They thought that faith alone in Christ was not enough.

For example, they thought that attending church and especially watching the priest celebrate the Lord's Supper earned forgiveness from God. They were thinking about what they had to do to be right with God rather than on what God did for them. Many bought pieces of paper that supposedly released them from suffering in a place called purgatory so that they could be holy and ready for heaven. They thought they could buy their way into heaven. Many thought that if you really wanted to be on God's good side you should give up all your property and live in an enclosed place where you would spend your time copying books, gardening and praying. They thought you needed to become a monk or a nun to earn salvation. These ideas enslaved people. They lost salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Very few Christians in America today would think they should become monks to earn God's favor. Very few would pay for a piece of paper that claims to release them from purgatory. Many Christians observe that the books of the Bible accepted by the early Christians do not mention purgatory. In fact, the Bible tells us that the person who believes and is baptized is saved. There is no need of an intermediate place before going to heaven.

Even so, the basic idea of having to do something to earn God's favor still troubles Christians today in America. Many of us lose sight of the good news about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and become consumed by political concerns, whether our political views favor the left or the right, or somewhere in between.

Those views on the political left can easily turn government into our god. We can easily think that if we work together hard enough, we can create a better life for everyone in our country. We can create heaven on earth.

On the political right, we can easily turn ourselves into gods. We can easily think that if we work hard enough, save, work smart and stick to it, we can create a better life for ourselves and maybe our loved ones as well. We can create heaven on earth—or at least make life more tolerable.

Either way, we bend the knee before a false god—a god that takes the shape of the government or a god that we see in the mirror. Either way, we believe a lie. Either way, we try to earn salvation. Either way, we lose Jesus Christ, we lose salvation and we fall from God's grace.

Paul's letter to the Galatians applies to us. The way we would try to earn salvation may change, but the basic problem remains. Our pride, reason and emotions would turn us from Jesus Christ and the

salvation he won for us and lead us to trust in ourselves to create heaven on earth. Paul urges you to **Stand Firm in Your Freedom**. He urges you to stand your ground in the freedom that comes from Jesus Christ alone.

It's real freedom that lasts forever (5-6)

"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value" (v 6), Paul tells the Christians in Galatia. In Christ Jesus good works have no value for your salvation, Martin Luther tells the Germans 500 years ago. In Christ Jesus, your political views and efforts today do not earn forgiveness from your sins and make you right with God. You need the righteousness Jesus earned for you when he obeyed God perfectly in your place. You need the forgiveness he earned for you when he shed his innocent blood to suffer the punishment you deserved. You need Jesus Christ.

In him you have freedom. In Jesus Christ you are no longer like oxen carrying a heavy yoke over your shoulders. Your sins are forgiven. Jesus defeated Satan for you. Jesus broke the chains that tied you to the burden of your sins. Jesus removed the curse of sin, which is eternal death in hell. He has given you life. With the Christians in Galatia, with the Christians in Germany *"we ...await...the righteousness for which we hope"* (v 5). We await the day when our eyes close in sleep to this sin-filled, troubled world and open to the perfect righteousness and joy we will experience in heaven, where there will be no more sin, no more doubt, no more fear, no more guilt, no more regret, no more consequences of death.

This freedom is yours *"through the Spirit"* (v 5). That's the Holy Spirit who brought you to believe the good news about Jesus Christ and who keeps you in that faith through God's Word in the Bible and through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

There's one more amazing fact about this freedom. It works love in your hearts. It creates a desire to praise God, to serve him, to love your wife, your husband, your children, your grandchildren, your parents, your grand-parents, your teacher, your students, your neighbors and yes, even those who hold political views very different from yours. You are freed to express your faith *"through love"* (v 6). Stand firm in the freedom Christ gave you. Amen.