

Reformation 2014 – Oct.26

Introduction to Galatians Lesson: Galatians 5:1-6

We Lutherans hold out the truth that we find in Galatians 5:1-5: Works don't save you. Works don't make you right with God. We are “saved by faith in Jesus alone – by grace alone – salvation is the gift of God.”

When we share this, sometimes we get the reply: “Well, what stops someone from living however they want, sinning as much as they want, and thinking: As long as I believe in Jesus, I can do whatever I want?” A young man, who was seated by me on the plane ride from Charlotte to Milwaukee, expressed that exact question. You see, he goes to a church that teaches: you are not saved by grace alone, but by a combination of your faith **and** your works.

I went on to explain a little more to him: The Bible does talk about good works. Take the end - vs.6 – of the section before you today. Here God explains the **changed attitude** in the heart of a believer. “Faith expresses itself in love.” As we celebrate Reformation, we shouldn't forget this.

In Lutheran circles, there is a saying to connect these truths: “Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone.” This keeps everything in its proper place: Good works do not produce a Christian, but Christians produce good works. Good works are our joyful response to God's gift of forgiveness. God loves our good works when they come from a thankful heart that trusts in **what Jesus has done** to save us.

GALATIANS 5:1-6

1 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.

Kid's message: (after Gospel lesson)

“He who stands firm to the end will be saved.” - Matthew 10:22

Here's a trivia question for you: In which country did the ancient sport of Sumo wrestling begin? Japan. How long has it been a sport? Over 2,000 years.

Let me explain why I'm talking about sumo wrestling. [Show picture, with explanation] Each sumo wrestler's goal is to push his competitor out of the ring or to cause his competitor to fall .

Satan is like a sumo wrestler. How? He is very powerful. And his goal is to push you, me, and other Christians away from Christ. Or to put it another way, his goal is to get you to fall from your faith in Jesus. And he never stops trying.

Now, look at yourself. With your own strength, you would never be a match for Satan's attempts to push you away from Jesus. And that isn't just because you are a kid. I wouldn't be a match against him either. But it is not with our own strength that we fight Satan. It is with God's Word that we fight him, and so it is God's strength that we use in our battle.

God's Word – the Bible – gives us the news that Jesus has already fought and won the battle that takes away our sin. We trust in him.

We're going to pick up God's Word more today, and turn to it for God's truths and his strength – at the time of the sermon. One way to help us understand and think about what we are hearing is: to ask some simple questions. Let me give you an example. I'll leave this up through the first half of the sermon...

Luther's strands, in a simplified form for kids:

What in here reminds me of something in my own life?

What in here reminds me of something for which I am sorry?

What in here tells me or reminds me that Jesus forgives me?

What in here leads me to be happy and to give thanks to God?

Sermon

Jesus tells us: "He who stands firm to the end will be saved." Paul encourages: "Stand firm, then...."

Read Galatians 5:1,4-5.

1 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. ... 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.

Want to be free of sin? Trust in Jesus alone. Want to be free from the hopeless cycle of guilt: trying and trying to be good enough, but never getting anywhere? Trust in Jesus alone. Trust in Jesus alone - that truth is the heart of Galatians 5:1-5. Rejoice! Christ has set you free!

I know I'm talking to a room with a high percentage of longtime Lutheran folks. So I realize – although I'm not hearing any reaction – you might be simply bursting inside at the sound of those truths, a boisterous mental "amen!" shaking your internal rafters. Maybe you almost had to clap your hand over your mouth thinking a "hallelujah!" might break out. But at the same time, I recognize you might be fighting the temptation to think: "I know all this already. I've been around. I get all this foundational stuff." Before you mentally check out, I want you to hear about "a reformation story reversed." Catch that?

The story began so wonderfully. A woman came to our church in Layton, UT. You rejoice anytime someone new comes through the doors. That joy is heightened in a case like this. She and her husband were members of the Mormon church where they were... "trying to be justified by the law." As she came to our church, as she pored through pages of the Bible in study, she learned that *"God saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy"* (Titus 3:5).

Her husband joined her in coming; they sat together in Bible Class. Eventually, they both became members. That was a time of joy. I'm not talking about the joy of seeing the membership number increase. I'm talking about hearing the words they spoke as they confessed their confidence in Jesus, and their joy in knowing they were saved by grace. Reformation!

But the day eventually came when they told me the news: "We're going back to our old church." I asked for the time to talk with them more. I talked with them about the move they were making; I wanted them to understand just what was at stake:

- You have two ways before you right now. The first one: you will try to get to God by your works. The second: God's gift to you of Jesus' work is your way. It's one or the other. But note this: If you are relying on your own works, Christ is of "no value to you."

The Galatian Christians to whom Paul first wrote these words were in danger of the same kind of "reformation reversal." Do you see pattern, spanning the centuries and millenniums? Paul warned the Galatians: If they would go back to relying on their works, it meant they'd be taking on an impossible task. You can live your entire life trying and trying to obey the law well enough to earn God's acceptance, struggling under the weight of God's demands, only to get to the end of life and realize that the only place all your striving has gotten you is to hell.

Satan has his sights set on you too – and me.

Satan's goal for Christians is "resurrection." You know that isn't the "resurrection and the life" which our Lord has for us. Satan wants nothing other than... to resurrect in our hearts the lie that we are able to earn God's love and forgiveness – that we must do something, play some part, in how we are saved.

We're not in some academic discussion today about the historical ins-and-outs of the Reformation. Brothers and sisters, we are talking about the fight of our lives: *"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil..."* (Eph.6).

Why are you giving your time to be here this morning in worship? What do you see as your treasure that is worth gripping ever more firmly through Bible Study? Christ freed us from sin! Through faith in Jesus we are at peace with God! Heaven is our home! We know we will be there, all because of our wonderful Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Yet our danger is to let our grip loose through carelessness or through a lack of vigilance. Or maybe even from pride, if we allow our minds to wander when we're face to face with the Word. . . just like bored students in a classroom with a professor whom they feel drones on and on: "we know this all already."

Martin Luther was a professor. He taught this very book we are studying today: Galatians. It was in an academic setting – at the University, but he spoke how the Word applies to life. If there was anyone dozing off when he came to Galatians ch.5, I imagine this warning word got their attention:

“...if we become smug and drowsy we shall lose [God's inestimable gifts]. It is not in vain that Paul commands us to be vigilant and to stand, because he knows that the devil is busily engaged in trying to rob us of this freedom that cost Christ so much” (Luther's Works, Vol.27, Lectures on Galatians ch.5-6).

“The words 'freedom from the wrath of God, from the Law (meaning the obligation to keep the law well enough to earn God's favor), from sin, from death, etc.' are easy enough to say; but to... apply this freedom's results to oneself is a struggle (there is agony of conscience) ... this is more difficult than anyone can say” (Ibid).

Martin Luther spoke these words not at the dawning days of the Reformation. It was almost 15 years *after* Reformation light had burst on the scene. What can we learn from this? Luther draws us to the conclusion, as we take to heart these words of Galatians ch.5:

Therefore, one's spirit must be trained, so that when it becomes conscious of the accusation of the Law, the terrors of sin, the horror of death, and the wrath of God, it will banish these sorrowful scenes from its sight and will replace them with the freedom of Christ, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, life and the eternal mercy of God...” (Ibid).

Our pastors' conference this past week took a closer look at the life of Katie Luther. You know Martin Luther was a monk, but did you know Katie was a nun? She, just like Martin, suffered under the Church's teaching: “You have to do enough to appease God.” So she prayed 7 times a day from age 10 on – even getting up at 1 a.m. to do so. She worked and struggled and did everything she could in an effort to secure her standing with God. By God's grace, she – like Martin – was brought out of that darkness.

Incidentally one of Martin Luther's writings was smuggled into her nunnery. She read it and found comfort in the promises of God. When the two eventually married, the Bible was read in their home – taught at their table – shared with one another to encourage each other. One of Katie's favorite passages was Psalm 31. “I trust in you, O Lord.”

You see how much strength God's Word gave to this family? For the devil came often in war, in guilt, in grief, in loss, in sickness, in pain. God's Word was their answer, their refuge, their fortress and their salvation. “Christ has set us free from sin – free from the penalty of the law. By faith in Jesus we are at peace with God. Heaven is our home. This is where we stand.”

How does this relate to your life today? You haven't spent time in either a monastery or a convent. You've maybe been around the Word all your life. But . . .

The devil doesn't give up – he comes after all God's children. He is subtle. Cunning. He disguises himself in voices from the world which appeal to logic. “You're not good enough for God to want you.” “You better give up.” A push toward despair. Or, “You better shape up, and then God will be happy with you.” A push toward self-righteousness.

The fact is: there are messages all around us that can easily mislead us; pushing you toward thoughts of despair, or pushing you toward self-righteous notions.

An interview in World magazine nails this. It was interview of a woman author, so it discusses how for women today there are so many pressures. Sometimes this comes from faulty spiritual messages being communicated out there:

“Women feel overwhelmed with all the things they think they need to do to be godly women... The 15 or 18 or 42 things you must do to get your act together, to have a perfect marriage, to have perfect children, to have your house perfect all the time so if Jesus walks in you won't be embarrassed. We smash our head against bricks (when we believe this).” (World – Oct.18, 2014, p.26-28).

“Then you have magazines that tell you how to (be the perfect wife and the perfect mother). Then you have your own heart which continually pumps out to you all of the rules you need to follow to be good.” (Ibid)

Men, what about us? Is your experience that much different? “Make enough money! Be successful!” If you're married... Be the perfect husband. If you have kids, be the perfect dad – always loving – always ready to listen, and understand, and always there, for everyone, etc.

God's Word gives strength. Prepare now, listen, grow. Why? So that when some accusation... some terror... some feeling comes that says, “I have to be better for God to accept me,” you're ready to banish the thought with the truth of God.

“We flee to Christ because He has done it all. That's the good news.” “It's finished. Christ has lived perfectly in your place. Christ died shamefully in your place, and He has risen in power for you. That's the message [we] need to hear.” (Ibid)

And it's not just men and women who face the devil's push against their souls. Parents – and grandparents – think of all the lies your children hear. Imagine all the pressures they face.

God's Word gives kids strength. Parents, walk your children to the Savior's side and place their hand in his hand. Read devotions to them. Tell them God's truth as you sit at home, and as you drive to activities. Kids, when you get old enough to read, pick up the Bible daily. Parents, teach your children to have a personal time of their own each day, reading a part of the Bible. Follow up with them. Check their understanding by asking them questions. Then you'll help them get the pattern: when attacks come... flee to God's truth . . . your entire life long. The good news of God remains: Christ has set you free. Your sin – not just part, but all of it – has been nailed to the cross. Your trust is in Christ alone. “Stand firm, then!” Amen.