

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.

<sup>2</sup> Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. <sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup> For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. <sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:1-6 NIV2011)

### **Stand Firm for Freedom**

Unless you've somehow haven't heard, read, or seen any news in the last couple months, you've heard a lot of talk about freedom. More specifically, the need to protect our freedoms. Why? Whether from conservative or liberal politically, you hear that we are in great danger of losing that freedom one way or another. We aren't here to argue which side is more right or less wrong. The point is: Americans love their freedom. In general, Americans have little tolerance for things that affect that freedom. So we can understand Paul's urgency in Galatians. He sees their freedom is in danger!

So Paul says, stand firm, because someone is trying to drop a yoke of slavery on you. A group of people insists that in order for anyone to really be saved, they still need to follow some of the Old Testament Laws. Not all of them. That would be ridiculous. But, circumcision—not talking just about the surgical custom for hygiene but God's requirements for Old Testament believers—you definitely need to do that one. They are telling those Galatian Christians, "If you really want to be saved, you need to follow that Law of God."

Today you and I might hear that and wonder, "What's the big deal?" But for those Galatian Christians, this is tough. They are hearing that their salvation is in question. They are being told they still need to do more. Then there's the fact that if they do this, they won't be feeling as much pressure and persecution from the Jews, their culture, maybe even from family and friends. And to top it all off: it makes sense. What's the danger of doing something extra to make sure you are forgiven? If that means they could have more of a sense of freedom in their lives, what is the big deal? And when it comes to something so important, shouldn't you have some personal responsibility?

But, the thing is, they had already been set free. They didn't need to try and get freer. All they would be doing is putting themselves in danger of completely losing that freedom!

How could they do that to themselves? Don't they realize what they have with their freedom? But don't you see that you are facing the same crisis today. No, it's not about the freedom of masks or no masks, what you are supposed to do during the National Anthem, even our freedom to gather for worship. This freedom can almost be lost in the background as you fight for all those other things. This freedom is far greater and superior affecting you long after your time in this world. It's a freedom that cannot be taken from you. But it's one that you and I have the terrible capability of giving up. It's the freedom Christ gives.

We feel burden from ourselves as we try to fulfill the expectations from ourselves and from others. We feel the shackles of wondering if I'm doing the right, best thing for myself, for my family, in the eyes of God. Am I doing enough volunteering, parenting, listening, loving, supporting?

And then instead of living in the freedom of Jesus we allow those things to weigh us down as we try to keep up with the world around us and listen to them. We too often believe the lie that if you fulfill enough of the expectations, make enough people happy or impressed, do enough things, then you will be free. You've listened to that empty promise that your life can make you feel more worthy and loved by God.

But what makes it all the more difficult is it seems to work for a little while. You feel a sense of freedom if you are able to keep up. You feel less pressure when you can fulfill those expectations and have their validation. You seemingly conquer that sin, resist that temptation, and you feel good because you did it right. But then something else comes up. More expectations. Other demands. That temptation didn't actually go away. You still have to deal with it tomorrow. Doing that stuff didn't really set you free at all.

So next you might think the freedom will come if I insist that I can do whatever I want not caring what anyone else says or thinks. And that works for a while. But it doesn't take too long to see you can't. And then when you don't get what you want, it burdens you even further with frustration and disappointments. Not to mention the fact that's not how God calls us to live. No, you aren't really free. It's bad enough because we place those burdens on ourselves. Then to make it worse, we place the burdens on other people. We put more rules on them that they need to follow in order to be forgiven. You might demand certain fruits of repentance to make sure they are really sorry. You might think you are protecting that freedom in Christ's forgiveness, but instead you are burdening consciences.

Whether it's doing enough to impress others or it's doing enough to make yourself feel better about you, it ultimately comes back to—whether we recognize it or not—trying to make ourselves right with God. The thought process goes if I can impress my neighbor,

God should be impressed with me too. If I can forgive myself, love myself, be happy with myself, then God can forgive, love, be happy with me.

Paul warns, if you insist on doing this: **“Christ will be of no value to you.”** Christ, his work, his accomplishments, gives you no personal benefits. You are on your own. And don't think you can bring up those things you were able to do. Don't think you can draw attention to those sins and temptations you have been able to conquer. Everyone who tries to do that, **“He is obligated to obey the whole law.”** God's Law and trying to earn God's favor is not a buffet line where you can pick and choose which parts you want on your plate and others you want to leave. It's all or nothing. And if you still try to be justified before God by doing something to make up for or on top of Christ's work, **“You have been alienated from Christ, you have fallen away from grace.”** You are calling Jesus a liar. You are saying he didn't suffer enough. You are telling him he did a bad job at saving you. So of course you would have a falling out with him and his love. You cause irreparable damages to that relationship. You are no longer on speaking terms. You are on you own before God.

And if that is so, you are lost. If you insist on being judged according to your own life, your accomplishments, you have no hope in that court case in heaven. There's too much evidence against you. No one is declared righteous by works of the Law. If it is by works you are saved, then it is not by grace. If the smallest fraction of you being saved is coming from you and your work, it's all lost. Because it's not just your actions that condemn you, it's who you are.

Jesus knows how easily we are burdened by the Law. He sees how left to ourselves we only make things worse. He knows how we are drawn to more laws and policies. Our sinful natures love rules and laws to self-justify itself and push against God. It doesn't want to hear I cannot free myself. I don't want to lean on anyone or anything besides me. He knows how it makes sense to you and me that I need to do something, anything to help and free me. Jesus sees that burden but he doesn't say, “Dig a little deeper and you can do it.” He doesn't say, “Try a little harder, do a little bit more, conquer that one sin and it will be enough.” Instead he looks at you and says, “Just stop. You don't need to. I've already done it all. It is finished.”

He who is God from eternity saw you buried under the weight of God's demands and so Jesus takes on flesh and blood to pick up that burden from you, to buy you back, and set you free. Jesus knows from experience God's demands. He's felt what it is like to live under God's expectations. But for Jesus it was not a burden. Because he loves God perfectly, he's free to live under those commands for you. He gladly carries that weight not out of constraint or because he has to. He does it because he loves God. Because he loves his neighbor. He loves you. He carries it all way to the cross and does not want

you to try and take back that burden again. It's for freedom that Jesus sets you free. So with the shedding of his blood he washes you clean and delivers you from sin and its curse so that God doesn't have record of them. So why should you? He delivers you from Satan's power so that he can't make you do anything and one little word can fell him. He's a liar and none of his accusations will stand in God's courtroom. With Jesus rising from the grave, he delivers you from death. Because our flesh and blood Savior lives we know that one day we too live again in flesh and blood, perfect as he is, and see him face-to-face.

This freedom does not come from you. It can't. A slave cannot free themselves. You must be set free. And that's what Jesus has done. It's not deserved. You can't work it off. You can't make yourself worthy of it. But that's grace. And you are saved by grace alone. And through Spirit-worked faith alone, it's yours. You were already declared free of sin's judgment at the cross. Then the Triune God sealed this freedom to you when you were washed with the water and Word at your baptism promising you that nothing in all of creation can take this freedom from you. It's this freedom you receive again when you hear, "Your sins are forgiven." It's this freedom that is yours when you eat and drink Jesus' body and blood given and poured for you at the Lord's Supper. It's yours by grace through faith.

And this faith is yours by Scripture alone. The Holy Spirit works through word and Sacrament to work faith in your heart that seals this freedom as your own. Through faith you have freedom from Satan's power. Freedom from sin and its curse. Freedom from the burden of God's demands and expectations. And so now you are free to love God with your heart, soul, and mind without constraint or burdens because that's what we do with Jesus' love. That's how faith expresses itself. You are set to love neighbor as yourself, putting them, their wants, their needs, before your own. Not because you have to or you know that one expects you. But because this is what faith does.

Stand firm in that freedom won for you by Jesus, worked and kept by the Spirit through Word and Sacraments, freedom that gives you a peace with God that surpasses understanding. It's a freedom to live, to love, and to hope for life eternal. Stand firm in that freedom. Amen.