

# **Faith and Freedom**

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## “Faith and Freedom”

**Text: Galatians 5:1-13**

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion [did] not [come] from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump [of dough]. I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brethren; only [do] not [turn] your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

### Introduction

*(Hammer and board for sound effect)* What does this sound remind you of? Some might say work, others a new house, others progress, for some a new chapel. But to a group of German peasants and merchants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who were suffering from the oppressive abuses of the Roman Catholic system of sacraments, it sounded like freedom. On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg church and challenged the contrived sale of indulgences. Luther’s hammer sparked a blaze of protests against the Roman Catholic dogma that had been smoldering for decades. For many, Luther’s protests stirred a desire for freedom- both spiritual and political.

One of the fundamental quests for humankind is the quest for freedom. From the churches of Reformation Europe, to the battlefields of Lexington and Concord, to the compelling stories of the Underground Railroad, to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the stories of freedom capture our imagination, as humans risk everything to find freedom.

From the opposite perspective, some of life’s most tragic stories are the loss of freedom. Whether the lost freedom is the result of military oppression, civic persecution or poor personal choices, the commonality is that the loss of freedom is tragic.

The reformer, Martin Luther knew the feeling of freedom. After years of self-suppression as a pious monk, Luther discovered the key to true spiritual freedom, faith in

Christ. *Sola fidei*, faith alone, became one of the great thrusts of the reformation in the sixteenth century, not only for Lutherans, but also for the Reformed and the Radicals.

In Galatians chapters 3-5, Paul establishes a contrast between two parallel and yet opposing sets of realities:

Promise (from the Word of God)	Vs.	Law
Faith (through the Spirit)	Vs.	Works (through the flesh)
Freedom	Vs.	Slavery

This contrast is established through the appeal to Abraham’s faith before the coming of the Law (ch.3), through an analogy from the biblical characters of Hagar and Sarah (ch.4) and in chapter five through the ethical implications for those who are walking in the Spirit versus those walking in the flesh. In using this contrast, Paul is encouraging his readers to have faith and to know the benefits of Christ. Let’s look at a key biblical text that describes the pivotal role that faith plays in spiritual freedom.

**Freedom in Christ (v. 1)**

The freedom of the Christian is from the merit of Christ being applied to our sinful states. Through faith in Christ, we have been joined to His benefits. Luther describes this benefit of saving faith as a marital relationship between Christ, the bridegroom and the soul as the bride. He states in his *Freedom of the Christian*, “Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s.”<sup>1</sup>

Like the intention of original creation, humans can walk in freedom from their sin because of Christ’s righteousness. Paul makes the point that we have been set free from our sins through Christ, so we should not accept a new slavery of keeping the Law. What is this that would cause our freedom to turn to slavery? Slavery comes when anything is added to saving faith for a person to be justified.

Luther used this text to fight against the oppression of the traditions of the medieval Catholic Church. The traditions of the church had become restrictions to the Christian freedom that they were to foster. Luther said in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* that the medieval Catholic church had “extinguished faith, obscured the sacraments and oppressed the gospel; but its own laws... it has decreed and multiplied without end.”<sup>2</sup> True spiritual freedom comes only through faith in Christ.

**Freedom Lost (vv. 2-4)**

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<sup>1</sup> *Three Treatises*, p.286. (Second revised edition, Fortress, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> *Treatises*, p.196

The submission to slavery comes from what could be considered an insignificant work. Someone might ask, “What harm does it do to add circumcision to my faith in Christ for salvation?” Paul points to four devastating consequences for those who want to add works to their faith. First, Christ will be of no benefit to you. To accept circumcision as necessary to salvation diminishes the merit of Christ. Paul’s comments are that either our righteousness comes from Christ only or we add works and lose the benefits of Christ. In other words, trusting Christ means no works; trusting works means no Christ. In his discussion of the faith of Abraham over his circumcision in Romans 4, Paul says, “For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified.”<sup>3</sup> The second consequence is that you will be under obligation to keep the whole law. Paul is charging that those who are preaching circumcision are not preaching the whole story. If someone accepts the law as a source of righteousness, then they must keep the whole law. In Galatians 3:10, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 in stating that cursing comes to anyone who does not keep every aspect of the law.<sup>4</sup> Perfection is the standard of the law.

The third consequence of adding works to faith is that you are severed from Christ. The righteousness of a Christian comes from being hidden in Christ. However, if another source of righteousness is sought, then these people are displaced from Christ. To be cut off from Christ means to be cut off from His benefits. We are joined to Christ in faith, to add works severs us from Him. The fourth consequence is that you have fallen from grace. To “fall from grace” does not mean to lose your salvation, but it means instead of receiving the benefits of grace one will receive the benefits of the law, death. To accept any work as adding to our salvation then we lose the benefits of Christ and gain death. Those in the circumcised party fell from grace. Paul’s statement does not imply a loss of salvation because his opponents preached a different gospel. Their faith was not a “saving faith.” By requiring circumcision for salvation, they risked losing the opportunity to receive the freedom of the true gospel. To add works to faith is not saving faith, but is a false faith produced by “another gospel.” (Galatians 1:6-8) The benefit of this false gospel based on works is death.

What are the benefits of the true gospel of Christ? In Galatians 4:5, it is our adoption as sons. What are some of the other benefits of the promises (or gospel) of Christ. (An example of twelve more) Colossians 1:13-14 states, “For He (God) rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have *redemption*, the *forgiveness of sins*. Romans 6:22-23 says, “But now having been *freed from sin* and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in *sanctification*, and the outcome, *eternal life*. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” 1 Peter 1:3-5, 9 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be *born again* to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain *an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away*, reserved in heaven for you, who are *protected by the power of God* through faith

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 4:14.

<sup>4</sup> A related idea would be Jesus’ comments in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Cf. Romans 2:25.

for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time... obtaining as the outcome of your faith the *salvation of your souls*. Isaiah 53:11b says, “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will *justify the many*, As *He will bear their iniquities*.” Or simply summarized, 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, “For as many as are *the promises of God, in Him they are yes*; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.” The promises of the gospel are found in Christ and can only become ours through faith.

Luther will apply this warning to the adding of any sacrament to the necessity of saving faith. He challenged his Roman Catholic contemporaries who had bought into a system of sacraments that were to be joined with faith for salvation. Luther cried that there is only faith, or there is no faith. Let this warning reverberate today. We must not add any sacrament or work to saving faith. Works have no meritorious effect, whether they are the medieval Catholic sacraments of penance or the Mass or if they are the modern evangelical ones of baptism, walking an aisle or local church membership. In themselves, these are fine, but if they are the certainty of our salvation, then they are additions to our faith. Anything that is added to our faith in Christ replaces Christ’s merit and puts us in jeopardy of our just reward of punishment.

### **Faith as the Key (vv. 5-6)**

As we are enabled by the Spirit, our faith waits for the hope of righteousness. The text does not just say that we are waiting on righteousness but the “hope” of righteousness. The righteousness that is ours in faith will one day become ours in full experience. Until then, our faith is the “substance of the things hoped for.” In this case, that is our righteousness. The idea is that our faith is the reality of our righteousness at the present time. Outside of faith alone, our righteousness does not exist, because its substance is in our faith.

In v.6, the word, “hope” paired with faith and love also brings in the triad of Christian virtues: faith, hope and love. The kind of love that is typical of faith is characterized further in verse 13.

### **Freedom to Love (v. 13)**

After challenging those who had accepted circumcision as a necessary complement to their faith (vv. 7-12)<sup>5</sup>, Paul describes the kind of freedom that faith provides. This freedom is not a freedom to pursue our selfish desires. This freedom is the opportunity to serve others in love not compulsion.

Luther describes the apparent contradiction of freedom and service in the life of Christian by using the analogy of the inner and outer man. The inner man (or spiritual man) is freed and nourished by faith alone. In the inner man, a product of faith, the Christian is free from all works. Faith would be the end of the story if we existed only in the spiritual (inner) man, as we will. The outer man (or the fleshly man) has to be kept under control through our works, so as to not make our freedom an opportunity for the flesh. Since our faith provides all things necessary for our righteousness and blessing, we

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<sup>5</sup> In so many words, Paul challenges them to circumcise themselves with a butter knife.

are free to serve others with no thought to reward or repayment. Our faith in Christ gives us the freedom to love God with all of our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

### Five Theses for a Modern Reformation

1. Preach faith and the gospel from the pulpit and not self-help. Do not mentor people from the pulpit; in life-on-life situations is where the practical wisdom is dispensed. If a pastor spends eight Sunday mornings in a row “casting his vision” before his people, then he has missed precious opportunities to preach the gospel to a dying generation, some of whom may not be back next week. Preaching must center on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need for faith.
2. Teach the Bible as the heart of ministry. Our preaching ministry must be consumed with the Bible. A steady diet of topical sermons creates an anemic and apathetic church. Our music ministry must be consumed with the Bible. Otherwise we pacify ourselves in perfecting pitch or rhythm or we are caught up in the ever shifting winds of the latest musical trends. Our counseling ministry must be consumed with the Bible. Otherwise all we have to offer people is baptized secular social sciences that do not offer grace, but instead offer techniques on how to cope with life without it. Our age group ministry must be consumed with the Bible. Otherwise our senior adult ministries are sappy sentimentalism and a way to the best group rates on travel. And our adult ministries are reduced to quick and easy ways to improve communication in our marriage, how to shape a budget or ways to improve your child’s behavior. And our student ministries are driven to cater to teen self-centeredness in activity or event planning instead of equipping young people to engage their increasingly secular world with a clearly-designed biblical worldview. And our children’s ministries strive to be the “Christian alternative” to all things secular and can only offer our children “Bible-like” moral lessons that would be just as easily picked up in the storybook included in the Chick-Fil-A kid’s meal.
3. Recognize that bigger is not always better when it comes to church life. When a pastor, church staff or a church body is more focused on building *their* kingdom instead of *the* kingdom, something has gone dreadfully wrong. It is troublesome that a pastor or pastoral team would try to shepherd a group of people when they have no idea where half of them are on any given Sunday and do not know the names of 60% of the ones who do show up.
4. Resist the rampant professionalism developing in our churches. While the academic and professional training we receive at seminary should make us more proficient in our ministry tasks, it does not mean that the paid staff should monopolize all ministry efforts of the church. When we have to hire a new associate intern for evangelism because we need someone to visit a prospect, then something is wrong. When the total ministry vision and activity of the church cannot extend beyond budgetary restraints or staffing limitations, we have a

- problem. Pastors and ministers need to put aside our egos and truly equip the saints to do the work of the ministry so that they can experience the maturity that comes as each part does its part (Ephesians 4).
5. Make disciples of all nations. Our mandate has not changed in two thousand years; we have still been given the message of “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor.5). Church history shows us that the epicenter of sending missionaries has been located in various places in specific times—in the first century Jerusalem then Antioch, Tours, Canterbury, Moravia, England (in the days of William Carey). Right now is the time for American Christianity to influence the world for Christ. We cannot be sure how long our time will last. We can spend our time, money and energy constructing affluent church buildings, but I have been to the great cathedrals of both Protestant and Catholic Europe—those cathedrals are empty. How did they spend their days of affluence? How will we spend ours? Let’s walk by faith and not by sight.

**Benediction Blessing:**

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Thess 5:23

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