

Reformation

Sermon for Reformation Sunday

Sermon Text: Galatians 5:1-6



For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

At the time when more and more cars were seen at the end of the 19th century, there was a controversial discussion about the purpose and benefits of a car. Because not all people were sure of the new horses made of wire and metal. In some countries, there were even laws that wanted to restrict this innovation. So at the beginning, car drivers couldn't drive faster than horse drawn carriages. Now imagine there were still people today who would insist that cars aren't allowed to go faster than horse drawn carriages and a driver ought to tie his car to a post like any other sensible owner of a four-legged animal. We can laugh about something like this today. And yet such things as this happen again and again. That happened repeatedly in the history of God's people. There are two important periods in the Bible that are fundamentally different and yet are constantly mixed up. In the first period, God had established a detailed plan that would save the people. God determined this plan in the Old Testament through 613 commands. But these 613 commands and restrictions had a very specific time and place. They were not for forever, rather they should point prophetically to the future. For example, that applied to the laws regarding the temple and making sacrifices. Through the temple and the sacrifices, God had prophetically pointed to the only Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would be a sacrifice for all people once and for all. After the coming of the Messiah, the temple and sacrifices were over. And there was no longer a need to sacrifice animals for one's sins. That's because Jesus died for our sins once and for all. Likewise with circumcision. Circumcision was the distinguishing mark of the Israelites. With this, they have identified themselves as the people of God. But circumcision was likewise displaced when Jesus Christ came. God opened the gates not just for Israelites but for all people through Jesus Christ. The Israelites were not the only people of God but all people who believe in Jesus and are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus' death and resurrection, a completely new situation materialized. We now no longer belong to the God who wants to point us to Christ through the 613 commands and through sacrificing, rather we belong to the God who already came to us through Jesus Christ. And exactly at this point there were tragic misunderstandings. People didn't want this gift of God in Jesus Christ. Instead, of believing in the living God, they felt more secure when they could do something themselves. And it's still like that today. Even though the death and resurrection of Jesus is completely certain and even though God Himself has established through baptism that we are God's children, people are not satisfied with this unique work of God but prefer to

add their own works to it. They want to return to the old times. They are like the people who have fast cars and big highways but insist that you don't drive faster than a horse drawn carriage. That is, unfortunately, not just a dumb mistake but also dangerous. Because whoever rejects salvation through Jesus Christ and prefers to do something themselves, finds themselves on a completely different path. Whoever wants to save themselves through keeping the commandments, no longer has Christ. He has rejected the path of God's salvation and finds himself on his own path and no longer on God's path. He must now make sure that he fulfills all the commands of God as they are defined in the Old Testament. As Paul says: Whoever wants to be saved by the law should obey the entirety of the law! Unfortunately, the church has repeatedly been misled by this idea.

In the same way before Luther, the church was chained to many different laws. Believing in Christ wasn't enough. God's forgiveness also wasn't enough. To prove that the people had really repented, they had to do many additional things. They even had to pay money to be forgiven! This work stifled faith in the church because the moment we want to prove something, it's no longer about believing in God but about believing in the works of people. And that was the basic purpose of Martin Luther, to free the church from all these chains. And that's why he proclaimed that God and His salvation must stand alone. Martin Luther stated four things that alone are the foundation of Christians and all four are not the works of people but the works of God. Luther summarized these four things in four sentences. 1. Faith alone, 2. Grace alone, 3. Jesus Christ alone, and 4. God's Word alone. These four things are the principles upon which we Christians stand and only they make us free! When we celebrate Reformation Day today, we want to remember precisely these things because it can always happen that we replace or combine God's work with our own works. I'll give you an example. When the asylum procedure was about the credibility of a Christian, the judge wanted to know, on a scale of 1-10, how much of a believer our church member is. To such a question, you can really only say: I can't answer this question because they have omitted the 0! That is to say, we Christians all have 0% faith. But the good thing is that God has 100% faith, and this fact makes us free, not how devout someone is. If we were to rank devout Christians on a scale of 1-10, two things would happen: First, everyone would strenuously try to appear as devout as possible. Second, everyone would look at everyone else so see if the others kept the rules. And that is exactly how it happens that Christians, who were called to freedom, again put on the chains of the law. They start to pretend and regularly find themselves in conflict with one another because each one wants to be the judge of the other. Christ freed us from all of that! Now one could think that such freedom, where we no longer have to do anything, must lead to immorality. And there were just such excesses in Lutheran orthodoxy where Christians drank unrestrained to demonstrate their Christian freedom. No, Christian freedom didn't free us to do what we want. Rather, it freed us to do what Christ wants. And Paul qualifies this with the word love. In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. That doesn't mean something like: "Christ has done so much for you, so please be nice to one another!" No, then we would make a new law out of Christ. Love can't be commanded. Rather, love is like a shadow. There, where Christ is, His shadow always casts love. And you don't have to conjure up or make up these shadows. He is simply there of His own accord. You also can't imagine He isn't there. Wherever Christ is, these shadows of love are also there. It's a law of nature. So love is not a law that we must do but it naturally belongs to it and freely grows from it. Just as the law makes us petty and obnoxious, so love frees us to approach others and to accept others even when they aren't how we want them to be. In 1523, Martin Luther had the first intense years of his liberation from the chains of the law behind him. He still wore a monk's tonsure but the hair was already growing wildly and partially covering it. His eyes

shone. He thought of what had happened and looked hopefully toward the future. With a shaky hand, he began to write and he wrote a song that speaks about salvation and comfort. A song that we like to sing to this day with full hearts and with great freedom.

1. Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, with exultations springing,
And with united heart and voice and holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done, how His right arm the vict'ry won.
What price our ransom cost Him!
Amen.