

Give Me Liberty (In Christ), Or Death (Under The Law)

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

I browsed the internet and came upon a list of important dates in U.S. history, dates which are national or state holidays. Two of them celebrate our victory over the British in the American Revolution, July 4th, the day we declared independence from Great Britain and September 19th, Cornwallis Day, the day when Cornwallis surrendered his army to the Americans, effectively ending the war. One commemorates our victory in the War of 1812. It is New Orleans Day, January 8th, when Andrew Jackson's army defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans. One commemorates our victory in W.W.I, Armistice Day, November 11th. Two commemorate our victory in World War II, VE day on May 8th and VJ Day on August 14th.

Last night was October 31st and it, too, is special holiday, Reformation. But there is a difference between it and all the others I mentioned. The other dates commemorate victories for the United States; October 31st commemorates a victory for the Church. The other dates mark victories against foreign enemies; October 31st marks a victory against the enemies within the church, false teachers.

When we think of the Reformation, we usually think of Martin Luther and the 95 Theses or his stand when he said, "Here I stand. I can no other." We think of A Mighty Fortress and how the church stands on Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone. But this is also a day to remember that the church's enemies are not just outside the church. Paul today warns us about the enemies within the church who preach a gospel other than the one found in the Bible. That is our emphasis today as we adopt a phrase from Patrick Henry, give us liberty in Christ or else we have death under the law.

I. The Law only produces death.

Let's say you get your statement from your bank. But it says, "We are not sure how much you have in your checking account. You could have \$200 or \$2000. We just don't know." Not knowing how much you have can paralyze you. You aren't sure if you should write checks for those bills. Those checks may bounce and at \$25 for each bounced check, it can be expensive. What about those checks you wrote yesterday? Uncertainty freezes us. It scares us.

That's what was happening in the churches in Galatia. They just heard the gospel message of Christ. They heard how their sins are forgiven. They rejoiced that this is by grace through faith. It is a done deal. Then a group of ministers came after Paul. They, too, preached about Christ like Paul. But then they continued, "If you want to make sure that you will sit in heaven with Christ, you better circumcise you children, observe the Sabbath, avoid pork and commit yourself to the Lord."

What's wrong with that? Doesn't grandma say, "Give me a hug and I will give you a cookie?" Is it wrong for God to say, "Give me a hug and then I will forgive your sins?" It may sound fine, even logical, but this is dangerous. Paul warns, ***"Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."***

Either you are saved by Christ, or you save yourself. An illustration I often use with our Catechism class is I ask them to pretend that they are on the Titanic. The ship is sinking but someone reserved a place for you in a lifeboat and is calling you to climb in. But you think you are a pretty good swimmer. You have a choice to make: climb in the boat or swim to England. The same is true when it comes to Christ. Either you believe that Christ died for your sins, or there is something you have to do in order to be saved. There is no mixing the two.

So, do you see what happens if someone adds the law, even a little bit of it, to the gospel of Christ? The law is a slavemaster. It says, "Do this, or else." And then it threatens, "The wages of sin is death." It promises only death. In Galatia, ministers tried to introduce a little law into the gospel. Be circumcised. Observe the Sabbath. But once you start to do that, you have a choice: be saved by Christ or save yourselves. Jump into the lifeboat or swim.

Is this still a threat to the church today? You bet. Often it is subtle. Someone says God hears your prayers only if you pray hard enough. Well, who here is sure he or she can ever pray hard enough? Or someone says God only helps those who help themselves. If God waited until we did something, we would never be saved. Patrick Henry viewed life under England and King George as slavery. He wanted liberty or give him death. If we live under the law, we live in slavery and in death. That's all the law promises you.

II. But Christ gives life and freedom.

But Paul states, ***"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."***

Christ came to set us free. Free from what? Free from the requirements and guilt of the law. Many times our church has been called the "strict church." I just don't know what people mean by that phrase. If it means that we teach only what Scripture says, then let's wear the title with pride. Most often it is intended as a criticism that we say you can't do this or you can't do that, strict rules. They criticize us for fellowship, roles of men and women, marriage, and so on. If that is what they mean, then they have not read the works of Martin Luther or listened to our sermons. You don't have to do this or do that. It doesn't matter if you stole something in the past or had lustful thoughts; it doesn't matter if you went to church every opportunity or missed some in the past; it doesn't matter if you give 10% to church or not; it doesn't matter if you are circumcised or not. What does matter is that Christ lived a holy life here on earth. It matters that he became our substitute on the cross and paid for our sins with his own life. What matters is not what we have done for God but what he has done for us through Christ.

If someone should come to you and say that your life is not good enough, that you need to commit yourself more to Christ or pray harder before God hears you, answer, "Yes, you are very true. I have not and cannot love God enough or my neighbor. The good that I want to do, I don't do and the evil that I hate I keep on doing. Thank you for reminding me of my sins. But I will not allow you to yoke me once again to the law. Christ lived a perfect life for me. He died for my sins. I am going to heaven not because of my own weak actions; I am forgiven and going to heaven because of what Christ did for me. This you cannot take away from me."

But don't we still preach and teach the Ten Commandments? Don't we teach fellowship and close Communion and so on? Certainly. We are free from the law's requirements, but we still want the law. We need it to make ourselves conscious of our sins so we don't take Christ for granted. But we also preach the law as a guide for the Christian. ***"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."*** We turn to the law because we want to keep it, not because we have to keep it.

Apple trees grow apples. Of course. If I duct taped some apples to your pine tree tonight, could I claim it is now an apple tree? No. Likewise, good works do not make us Christians; Christians make good works. That's the problem. Apples duct taped to a pine tree does not make it an apple tree. A person doing some Christian things doesn't make him a Christian. But if somehow you can convert that pine tree into an apple tree, then it will produce apples.

The Holy Spirit through the gospel makes the Christian, makes him an apple tree so that he can and does produce apples, i.e. good works. That is why we still preach the law. The gospel frees us from the demands and guilt of the law. But it also frees us to willingly serve God in thanks and love. We want to love and follow God. We ask him how and he points us to his law. We still preach the law, not because we have to. We use it because we want to. We are free to obey it willingly.

Reformation marks the struggle of the church with her enemies. In our readings today we heard much about the Church's enemies. We heard how Daniel had to deal with governmental laws that told him to live contrary to God and his Word. Jesus warned us how the world will hate us for standing with Christ and holding to his Word, the Bible. Even family members will disagree and cause us all sorts of grief. Paul pointed out how the devil uses enemies within the church to attack the gospel and preach something which is no gospel at all, a commingling of the law and gospel. We know from history how Martin Luther saw the same in his day, church leaders not directing people to the comfort of the gospel but to the terror of the law. And the struggle goes on today. Dear friends, it is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Don't be burdened by a yoke of slavery to the law. Cling to his Word. Let it tell you the truth for the truth will set you free. INJ Amen.