

Stand Firm in the Freedom of Christ

We live in the information age—but all the information bombarding us can pose a huge challenge. What should the government be doing about the coronavirus? We don't know for sure. Look at the election—which candidates have the right policies or character? There are so many ideas out there. Not to mention all the information you have to digest for your own work and life. This morning I realized I needed to look online to figure out how to change the time on the clock on my car dashboard—and found there were different directions for that.

The real problem I see is the attack on truth. Not just people spreading falsehoods. It means the assault on the concept of truth. Some people say there is no real truth. “You have your facts, I have mine. There is no objective truth.”

This is a terrible concept—because our Christian faith is based on a set of facts. What is the answer to our guilt? God actually lived on this earth, born of a virgin, he lived perfect life, and then died to pay for our sins. Where do we find hope in face of death? That same God, after dying, rose from the dead. He was seen alive for 40 days. That is the basis for Christianity. There are no alternate facts.

In our Second Lesson, Paul writes to Christians who were being misled. They were being told a different story, alternate facts, fake news—that you aren't saved by faith in Jesus, rather you have to do some good works or you're not really saved. Paul addressed the attack head on. We are free from guilt and fear in Christ Jesus. Stand Firm in the Freedom of Christ.

The Book of Galatians is all about how we sinful people can possibly stand before God. We have violated God's law; we deserve to be punished eternally. But Jesus Christ, God himself, came to earth, to take our place. He was our substitute—and not like a quarterback gets hurt so they put in the second-stringer hoping he won't mess up. No, we're the ones that messed up completely; so Jesus, the perfect man, came to take our place.

Jesus lived a perfect life for us. And now God credits Christ's work to us sinners. We are justified—that means, we stand before the holy Judge, and he says, “Not guilty!” Not because of anything we did; he says we're not guilty because Jesus paid for our sins. This is a gift, pure grace.

But some people were trying to convince the Galatians this was wrong. You need more than faith in Jesus, they said. And that makes sense: we say, There's no such thing as a free lunch. Heaven can't be a free gift, handed out to just anyone. That's too good to be true.

The Galatians were told that the works you need to do are the works of the Old Testament ceremonial law. Works like circumcision. Now, God had told the Jewish people to circumcise baby boys as a reminder that, one day, one of those boys would be the Savior, the Savior promised to Adam and Eve, promised to Abraham, promised to David. But once that Savior came, there was no more need for circumcision as a religious ritual. If the Galatian Christians continued to practice circumcision, they would be saying that the Savior had not yet arrived.

The same would be true for Old Testament sacrifices; and the same with the Sabbath. Insisting on these old ceremonies would be denying that Jesus was the Savior.

If a circus was coming to Findlay, you'd see ads all around town, on billboards, in the paper, on social media. But once that circus had come and gone, the ads would disappear. There'd be no need for them. The main act had already come.

Once Jesus came to earth and paid for our sins, there was no need for the Old Testament previews, like circumcision. Christians are free from OT ceremonies.

More than that, Christians are free from all the law—that is, they do not need to worry about not doing anything to be saved. Our salvation is entirely dependent on Jesus. When we violate God's law, we feel sorrow over our sin, and we confess that sin to our God; and he responds not by nagging, not by laying on a guilt trip; God responds by saying you are forgiven. Your sin is gone once and for all.

Don't be fooled, Paul tells the Galatians. **“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.”** To go back and do the OT laws would be like a freed slave running back to his master. It wouldn't make any sense. Doing those laws would not just be falling back on a few old traditions. It would be a rejection of Christ. It would be saying that Jesus' life and death and resurrection were not enough to save you.

So Paul gets very frank with those **“who are trying to be justified by law.”** **“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 the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”**

To insist on circumcision is to renounce Christianity. Paul's reasoning is clear:

Accepting circumcision would negate everything that Jesus did for us. **“Christ will be of no value to you at all.”**

Accepting circumcision meant Jesus had not saved you, so now you had to **“obey the whole law.”** It would be all up to you to pay for your sins; you'd have to obey every command perfectly.

And accepting circumcision would mean rejecting God's love; you'd be substituting your works for what Jesus did. You would be **“alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”** God would not be your Savior.

That is not what a Christian thinks. We Christians have confidence, absolute confidence, because our hope rests on Jesus. **“Through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.”**

You have hopes for your life. Maybe you hope for good health. Maybe you hope your family will grow up strong and close. But the best thing you can hope for is **“the righteousness”** of Jesus. For his righteousness covers over all the sins you've ever committed. It's like a robe that hides whatever you're wearing. Jesus righteousness hides all the times you were angry, all the times you said or posted bad things about people, all the evil thoughts that run through your head. His righteousness is God's gift, guaranteeing your salvation.

Paul says **“we eagerly await”** this righteousness **“by faith..through the Spirit.”** God the Holy Spirit made us into believers who hold to Christ instead of our own works.

His conclusion? **“In Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith.”** Trust in Jesus, not your works.

Of course, with Jesus in your heart, you will do good works, to thank your Savior. You have **“faith expressing itself through love.”** That is where our works enter the equation: We are saved by Jesus; and because we are saved by Jesus, we use our time to serve God and our neighbor with works of love.

500 years ago Martin Luther was facing excommunication by the Catholic Church and the possibility of imprisonment by the emperor. Luther responded by writing several great papers about our salvation. In November, 1520, Luther wrote *On the Freedom of the Christian*. In this treatise Luther made two amazing statements.

First, A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none. You may not think of yourself as a free “lord.” But in Christ you have been set free from the punishment for your sins. And you are free from the path of sin: Christ lives in you, so you can say “No” to sin. No person can force you to sin; even Satan can’t compel you to disobey God. Even those old habits that you keep falling into—the Holy Spirit has given you a new life, so you don’t need to keep doing them. In this sense you are a lord over all things.

You are perfectly free, even more free than the richest person on earth. What would the richest person on earth be thinking about? He’d be thinking about how to hold onto his riches; he’d be worried every time the stock market dipped or at every bit of news that seemed threatening. But we Christians have the greatest riches stored up for us in heaven. Already now we are children of God. We don’t need to be afraid. We can live confidently. We are lords in Christ.

But what do we do with that freedom? Luther’s second statement on our freedom is even more amazing: The Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. That is, we are underneath everyone else; we are slaves to all other people. Since we know we are saved for eternity, we can devote our time on earth to serving—serving God and serving our fellow man.

Many when they retire say that they are busier than back when they were working. That’s not just because there are more projects once you retire (though there may be a “Honey do” list). It’s because once you retire you want to use your abilities, to do something with your time.

We Christians are, in a sense, retired; we are perfectly free from having to do works to save ourselves. But now that we are free, we want to do good as we thank our Savior.

Our faith leads us to serve others. Again, Paul said we have **“faith expressing itself through love.”** The Book of James says that “faith without deeds is dead”—true faith shows itself in works of love. Jesus said the same thing. Jesus once described our Christian lives as soil where seed is planted. One kernel of corn produces a stalk that yields a hundred kernels of corn. Likewise our faith keeps working, every day of our lives, helping those in need and glorifying our Father.

The Reformation of the Church stressed that we are saved by faith alone. But Luther and his followers knew that faith is never alone; faith always leads the Christian to serve.

Martin Luther and others preached this boldly, even when they were persecuted. Just like Jesus said in our Gospel, Martin Luther had to stand before his king, the Emperor Charles. But the Holy Spirit gave him the words to speak, as he stood firm in Christ.

May we hold to these truths of our faith, even when some people try to mislead us, even when people say it doesn’t matter, you have your interpretation and I have mine...No. Stand firm in the freedom of Christ.