



GALATIANS 5:1-6 | Stand Firm in Faith's Freedom!

Sunday, October 26, 2014 – Festival of the Lutheran Reformation

¹ 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.

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

All eyes were on him. With bated breath they waited for his reply. Would he take back everything he had spoken? Would he turn from these rebellious ways and instead follow the traditions of people for centuries? In just a moment, his answer would explain where he stood. The man gathered himself as he approached the judicial court convened for his convenience. He knew how serious this was. To go with what the court meant that he had to essentially disown everything he knew to be right. To oppose meant certain death. To oppose would be very unwise. So, Peter collected his thoughts, and began to firmly speak to the ruling council of the Jews: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:8b-12)

All eyes were on him. There was a hushed silence in the crowd as he arose from his bench and got up to speak. What will he say? Would he take back what he had done? Would he admit he was wrong? Would he seek to compromise? He collected himself, ready to answer the high court before him. He knew what to expect. He knew he wouldn't be popular. Stephen knew he wouldn't walk out alive. And he firmly spoke: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me!..." "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:2,51-53)

All eyes were on him. This was the king of the land. Surely his enemies had planned this. They were all but hoping that the king would declare immediate punishment by death. But it was a risk he knew he had to take. He knew what could come of such a bold statement. He knew where the king stood concerning his faith. But he had to. He had no choice. So Paul firmly spoke: "King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill

me. But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (Acts 26:19-29)

All eyes were on him. He knew that this court had the power to condemn him. He knew that the church to which he belonged thought him a heretic. But most of all, he knew that what he had written, what he had spoken, what he had taught up to this point was the truth. And he knew that it was the truth that was important. So he collected his thoughts, and in front of a packed courtroom, Luther firmly spoke: "Since then your sere Majesty and your Lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

What emboldened these men—Peter, Stephen, Paul, Luther, and countless others through history—to speak so firmly and so confidently? Grace. You see, in each of these instances, these men were standing before a group of people who believed that what they did mattered in the grand scheme of being saved. They believed that if they dotted every "I" and crossed every "T" they would have it made. And so these men--the Sanhedrin, the pagan Romans, the Catholic Church—they spent countless hours of their lives making every attempt to earn their right to be saved. You might even say that they were enslaved by this constant searching for salvation. And they would never find it. They could never find it.

But don't we do the same thing? How many times do you and I find ourselves giving a good pat on our backs for who we are? How many times are we not like that pharisee in the back of the temple, thanking God that we aren't like this person or that person. How often don't we think so highly of ourselves when we place the check in the offering plate, or spend "X" number of hours at church, or did this or that without being asked or told? How many hours a day do we focus on trying to make ourselves "right" with God without even realizing it?

If that's true of us, it was true of these men, too. So how were they able to speak so confidently despite so many mistakes? That question can easily be answered by what Paul wrote when he calls himself the "chief of sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15) Peter certainly understood what that felt like as he stood in disbelief in the courtyard that cool spring evening. While we don't hear it in Scripture, we can assume that Stephen felt the same way. And just before this famous statement Luther said: "If the Lord Himself, who knew that He could not make a mistake, did not refuse to listen to someone speak against His teaching, even from a worthless slave, how much more ought I, scum that I am, capable of nothing but mistakes, seek and wait for any who may wish to bear witness against my teaching."

You see, this is the point. This is why we can be so bold as we speak. We know who we are. We know that we certainly are "sinful from birth, sinful from the time we were conceived." (Psalm 51:5) We know that "we do not do anything good." (Romans 3:10) We know that even what we think is good is nothing but a heap of "dirty rags." (Isaiah 64:6) We know that our "sinful soul deserves to die." (Ezekiel 18:4) And we know that we are nothing but "slaves to sin." (Romans 6:20) In other words, because of who we are--not even by what we've done!--you and I deserve hell itself.

But that's not what God gives us. In fact, God has washed us clean through baptism (Titus 3:5). We have put on the clothes of Christ through baptism. (Galatians 3:27) Through our baptisms we were buried with Christ, assuring us of our resurrection some day. (Colossians 2:12) He offers his very body and blood today in the sacrament. He assures you that it is "for you" for the forgiveness of sins. Through Christ God has set us free! (Galatians 5:1) Our heart, and the world, doesn't like hearing that. We want to be able to be a part of something. We want some of the credit. We want to be able to say we did something to contribute. But the awesome truth is that we don't! We can't! If we did, all would be lost. Luther beautifully wrote in a prayer for pastors: "Do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all." Isn't that true for you and for me? Left to our own devices we would "wreck it all." We would end up enslaved to the same old grind again, waking up day in and day out looking for ways to please God and earn a spot in heaven. But take heart, dear Christian! No more work is needed! The deed is done! Heaven is won! Stand firm! Speak boldly! And live freely in God's grace! Amen.



Soli Deo Gloria!

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