

## Galatians 5:1-6

<sup>1</sup>It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not allow anyone to put the yoke of slavery on you again. <sup>2</sup>Look, I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup>I testify again to every man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obligated to do the whole law. <sup>4</sup>You who are trying to be declared righteous by the law are completely separated from Christ. You have fallen from grace.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, through the Spirit, we by faith are eagerly waiting for the sure hope of righteousness. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. Rather, it is faith working through love that matters.

## Freedom

### I.

Freedom. It's a word that stirs hearts and minds and emotions.

At the time of the Revolutionary war, the colonists sought freedom from the oppressive rule of the British monarchy. Abraham Lincoln later brought to the forefront of the hearts and minds and emotions of the American people that not everyone enjoyed the freedom enumerated in the Constitution of the United States. A bloody Civil War was undertaken to insure that freedom would be given to all, including the African Americans who had been so long enslaved.

The people of the United States have become accustomed to free and fair elections at which we pick our rulers. We prize the freedom of religion enumerated in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution; that freedom permits us to worship as we choose and not to be pressured into changing the doctrines of Scripture at the whim of the state. Political freedom and all its implications and its blessings come quickly to mind on this Reformation Sunday just before our presidential election.

### II.

For all its advantages, political freedom isn't the kind of freedom Paul was speaking about. He was speaking about freedom from the Old Testament Law.

There were all kinds of rites and rituals that went along with worship in the Old Testament. Various fasts were mandated. Specific sacrifices were called for. How and when and *where* a person could worship was all part of it. What foods a person could eat and which foods would make a person unfit for worship. The lists of dos and don'ts went on and on. This was the Ceremonial Law—the rules that governed Israel's worship.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, certain sects within the fledgling Christian church were insisting that in order to be considered a proper Christian, one had to follow some of the Ceremonial Law requirements. One of those they insisted on was circumcision. Paul vehemently disagreed. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters" (Galatians 5:6, EHV). In the New Testament church, circumcision is an adiaphoron—something neither commanded nor forbidden by God. A Christian man's relationship with Christ is not dependant on circumcision.

*Insisting* on circumcision, however, was *not* an adiaphoron. "Look, I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup>I testify again to every man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obligated to do the whole law" (Galatians 5:2-3, EHV). To *insist* that Christians *must* follow certain parts of the Old Testament Ceremonial Law, Paul says, is to put the Christian under the *whole* Ceremonial

Law.

Around here, you may remember the Blue Laws. The Grandville area still had sales of alcohol banned on Sundays until just recently. Many of us who are a bit older might remember nearly all stores being closed on Sundays. People in some communities in the area still find their neighbors looking at them in distaste should they be outside mowing the lawn or washing their cars on a Sunday afternoon.

These laws and rules were put in place to encourage setting aside a day for worship and rest, much as the Old Testament Sabbath Day. While God *mandated* no work on the Sabbath, those were part of the worship laws for his Old Testament people; they no longer apply for New Testament worship. The New Testament church chose Sunday as the typical worship day in our Christian freedom. To *mandate* the same kind of restrictive rules that applied to the Old Testament Sabbath is to go beyond what God says.

The same thing applies as what Paul was saying about circumcision: if you obligate Christians to some kind of New Testament Sunday laws that demand no work be done, you obligate New Testament Christians to do the whole law. That means not just no work, but no pork and no shellfish in your diet. It means that we would be obligated to learn about all the things that make a person unclean and unfit for worship. It means that we would be obligated to start raising sheep so that we could make sure we had enough for the necessary sacrifices. Of course, we couldn't properly sacrifice, because we aren't at the temple in Jerusalem, so we would be obligated to make some pilgrimages from time to time to fulfill our worship requirements.

Elsewhere Paul said: "Do not let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in regard to a festival or a New Moon or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup>These are a shadow of the things that were coming, but the body belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17, EHV). All those Old Testament Ceremonial Laws were supposed to help the people look ahead to the *real* sacrifice, which was Jesus.

Legalism sets you back. Legalism takes away the freedom Jesus won. Legalism *demand*s a person must act a certain way and conform to certain things in order to be considered to be a Christian.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not allow anyone to put the yoke of slavery on you again" (Galatians 5:1, EHV). The Old Testament Ceremonial Law had been part of life. It was like muscle memory. Peter had a hard time eating foods that had previously been considered unclean. At times it was difficult for Jewish believers to associate with Gentiles, even those who were Christian; that, too, had been forbidden in the past.

There is another dangerous yoke of slavery. Some people think it is freedom—cultural freedom. Luther described it as a freedom of the flesh. This so-called freedom turns the forgiveness Jesus won on its head and embraces sin. "Since Jesus died on the cross, I can do whatever I want without a second thought." While Paul said we were not to be held captive by the *Ceremonial* Law with its worship rules, we are not to ignore God's Moral Law for all people of all time.

### III.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free... <sup>6</sup> it is faith working through love that matters" (Galatians 5:1, 6, EHV).

Jesus died on the cross. Jesus was the sacrifice all the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws looked ahead to. It is finished. It has been completed. The shadow of all the things that were coming has been revealed in the reality of what Jesus has done.

All the lying, cheating, stealing, covetousness, hatred, sexual sins, and all the other violations of the Moral Law were paid for by Jesus on the cross. Even the sins of legalism that insist others continue to follow bits and pieces of the Ceremonial Law have been paid for by our Savior. All has been covered by the blood of the Lamb.

#### IV.

On Reformation Sunday we give thanks that Martin Luther recognized and squelched the abuses of legalism in his day. A look back encourages us to not try to enforce the same legalism today.

“Indeed, through the Spirit, we by faith are eagerly waiting for the sure hope of righteousness. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. Rather, it is faith working through love that matters” (Galatians 5:5-6, EHV).

Faith believes in what Jesus has done. Faith looks ahead in joy. Faith eagerly waits the “sure hope of righteousness.” Heaven is not some vague, uncertain future, but a real place of perfect joy in worship of our Savior-King.

God grant that same joy as we look forward to heaven in the freedom of the gospel restored to us in the Reformation. Amen.