

Thank God We Are Free At Last!
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Galatians 3:23-29

(Contemporary English Version)

²³ The Law controlled us and kept us under its power until the time came when we would have faith. ²⁴ In fact, the Law was our teacher. It was supposed to teach us until we had faith and were acceptable to God. ²⁵ But once a person has learned to have faith, there is no more need to have the Law as a teacher.

²⁶ All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ And when you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. ²⁸ Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. ²⁹ So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham's family, and you will be given what God has promised.

The Sermon

Paul's letter to the churches in the region known as Galatia, doesn't receive as much attention today as it probably deserves.

It especially deserves attention whenever an individual congregation, or a denomination, is struggling to identify the limits of Christian freedom.

Anyone who has grown up in a strongly religious family, or in a church that is passionately dedicated to certain ways of demonstrating to others that it is Christian (in our family and faith tradition we called it witnessing to non-believers), knows that each faith tradition tends to add a bunch of "do's," and a bunch of "do not's" that can't be found in the Bible as being essential to one's salvation.

But who gets to decide what is, and what is not, vital to faith.

For example, I grew up in a strongly religious home and a passionately Evangelical church which, in retrospect, I realize succeeded in taking the "Fun" out of "Fundamentalism."

It would be fair to say that we were known in our community and by our friends more for what we didn't do as a sign of our faith, than what we did do.

At some point prior to my coming along, folk in this Swedish Evangelical Free Church tradition had determined that you couldn't be a Christian in the 20th century and also drink, smoke, dance, play cards, go to movies, and so forth.

And it wasn't just the Swedes who thought this, because when I attended Wheaton College in the 1960s, we signed a pledge saying we wouldn't do these things either, and violating the pledge could get you kicked out of the school. So, it was taken very seriously.

But, was it essential to Christian faith?

A whole bunch of other folk who were convinced they were going to heaven given

their convictions, didn't think so.

But the traditions die hard.

A couple weeks' back, when I was attending my 50th h.s. reunion in my home town, we were at the home of a classmate who had converted his home into what was called "The 50's Place." At the outset of the evening we were gathered outside in a spacious backyard which included a bar area, and as one of the earlier arrivers I had stationed myself on one of the bar stools and was having a class of wine while talking to the spouse of one of my best friends from high school days.

Another classmate walked up and said, "Bill, I wouldn't expect to find you sitting at a bar."

I said, "I guess I've changed since you remember me."

She said, "But you are now a minister aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, "but a Presbyterian one, so we don't believe that having a glass of wine is a ticket to Hell."

"Oh," she said, but I could tell that she still did, so it made our conversation a bit awkward to say the least.

So, what does save or damn us?

It is not a new conversation. In fact it was going on with great passion and gusto in the earliest church, as evidenced by Paul's passionate – and at times very angry – letter to the churches of Galatia.

And just why is Paul so passionate?

His passion relates to his conviction that God through Christ has made adoption in the Covenant relationship previously restricted to Orthodox Jews – of which he'd been one of the most zealous – available to non-Jews.

Paul believed this so fervently, that he spent and gave his post-conversion life to sharing the "good news" of salvation with Jews and non-Jews alike.

But Paul's practice was to establish churches, seek to ground them in faith, and then move on.

In the case of the churches of Galatia and elsewhere, once he moved on, other missionaries moved in and sought to convince the newly converted that Paul had given them an incomplete Gospel. Their conviction was that to be grafted into a covenant relationship with God, accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord wasn't sufficient for salvation.

Now they too had become "Christian," mind you, but they might best be labeled "Jewish Christians," convinced that Gentiles were acceptable as Children of God through Christ, but only if they also became children of Abraham through circumcision and following the Jewish dietary laws, etc.

Comparable to the Christianity in which I was raised, there was indeed recognition of the importance of Christ's saving actions for salvation, but you weren't truly

saved unless you also did – or didn't – do certain things.

And Paul, bless his heart, wasn't going to have any of it, and he wasn't going to let the Galatian Christians fall for it either, so he shot off this letter that was vital to the understanding of being Christian without becoming Jewish in Paul's day, but was also vital to Martin Luther's reformation attempts to free the church from all the trappings of the Catholic church of his day, and rest into the freedom that comes through Christ and faith – faith alone, and Scripture alone – was how Luther viewed it.

But whether the Christian method in Paul's day, or in Luther's day, or in our day, the challenge consistently is to ask what will fundamentally provide freedom from this sin disease which we seem to be unable to avoid, while also avoiding tacking on a bunch of legalistic thou shalt and thou shalt nots?

And Paul's answer, which remains the bedrock of Orthodox Christianity was that it is not obedience to the Law, it was accepting God's love most fully expressed through the freely self-giving Jesus – God's Christ – meaning God's anointed one.

To more fully grasp Paul's conviction and logic, we need to include verses 21 and 22 of Chapter 3 into our text. They read (NRSV):

²¹ Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make [us] alive, then righteousness would indeed have come through the law. ²² But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So, how do we get out of this prison?

Only through faith, and not through works.

I need to acknowledge that I am not a knee-jerk believer in all that Paul has to say in Galatians or in his other letters. He had a mercurial personality, and because he was writing letters, not intentionally writing what he knew or believed would become Holy Scripture to stand for all time, he could be inconsistent, just as any of us can be who are passionate about the people or congregation's we love, and about the God in whom we believe we have access through Christ.

But I also profess to you that I believe Paul has done all of us an enormous favor, and given us a gift for all seasons, by saying no to legalism, and yes to grace and faith.

We have, indeed, been given the key to let us out of that which imprisons us.

Let us not consciously or unconsciously slip back into add-on legalism that compromises the Good News of the Gospel.

To God be the glory.

Amen