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Breathing the Fresh Air of Liberty in Jesus Christ

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

“Faith Working Through Love”

January 26, 2014

Sermon Text: Galatians 5:1-15

Scripture Reading: Romans 5

Introduction-

“The world’s argument is that the Father in heaven does not care what a person believes or disbelieves, since true religion consists only of leading an upright life, exercising virtue, and doing good works. Why should it be a sin, they say, if a person fails to believe something that is completely

contrary to his God-given reason? The world claims that if there is such a thing as God and final judgment, on the Last Day people will not be asked what they have believed, but what kind of lives they have led. Others wish to dig deeper into these matters. They claim that if the Father in heaven is especially pleased with a person’s faith, it is because that faith is such a glorious work and such a beautiful virtue. Thus they can see no reason whatsoever why He should not be equally well pleased, say, with a person’s love, patience, bravery, justice, impartiality, truthfulness, and similar qualities. What causes these objections to the role of faith in Christian doctrine? Without question, coarse ignorance is the primary source. People simply do not know what faith is according to the Holy Scriptures. Far from regarding saving and justifying faith as nothing else than stubbornly sticking to certain religious teachings (as the Hindus and Muslims do), Christian doctrine declares that simply sticking to the teachings revealed in Holy Scripture is useless. In fact, this approach leads straight to hell. Christianity says that anyone who

builds on those teachings is building on sand. While these other religions claim that we Christians lift up faith and say it is a glorious work and a precious virtue, on the contrary, we teach that faith does not justify and save a person because it is such a good work. Rather, what saves is the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, which faith grasps.”

Ferdinand, Carl; Wilhelm Walther (1905-07-02). Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible (Kindle Locations 8248-8261). Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

In the history of the Christian church, one error that twists the good news of Christ into the bad news of works righteousness can be summarized in these words:

“Faith justifies and saves because of the love and renewal it produces.”

That is to say, faith produces good works and it is those good works which justify us before God because they are our own good works, our own inherent righteousness, and that is what God requires of us. This is of course the teaching of the Roman Catholic church.

“Roman Catholicism is the sinner’s religion of default . We must be on guard, even as Christians, that we do not permit our sinful flesh to lead us astray in this regard. Works righteousness makes sense to the world. Apart from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in us, we would all embrace this religion.”

Listen to the following statements and see how deceiving this business can be:

“The righteousness of faith means being made righteous before God, because of love infused by the Holy Spirit, virtues, and the works following them.”

“Faith saves on this account: because the renewal by faith is begun in us, which dwells in love for God and for one’s neighbor.”

“Faith has the first place in justification, yet renewal and love also belong to our righteousness before God in a particular way. Although renewal and love are not the chief cause of our righteousness, nevertheless our righteousness before God is not entire or perfect without such love and renewal.”

“Believers are justified before God and saved jointly by Christ’s righteousness credited to them and by the new obedience begun in them. Or, believers are justified in part by the credit of Christ’s righteousness, but in part also by the new obedience begun in them.”

“Faith does not justify without good works, so that good works are necessarily required for righteousness and without their presence a person cannot be justified.”

All of those statements come from the Lutheran Book of Concord, a reformation document, which condemns those teachings as a false gospel. The Book of Concord goes on to clearly state:

We believe, teach, and confess that good works should be entirely excluded from the question about salvation, just as they are excluded from the article of justification before God.

We reject and condemn the following ways of speaking when they are taught and written:

- **Good works are necessary to salvation.**
- **No one has ever been saved without good works.**

- **It is impossible to be saved without good works.**

In these last times it is certainly no less needful to encourage people to Christian discipline to the way of right and godly living and to good works. We need to remind them of how necessary it is that the exercise themselves in good works as a declaration of their faith and gratitude to God. But works should not be mingled in the article of justification.

Here are some more statements from the confessions and catechisms on this subject. This is the London Confession of Faith:

1. Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; **not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness;** but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God. (Romans 3:24;

Romans 8:30; Romans 4:5-8; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:30, 31; Romans 5:17-19; Philippians 3:8, 9; Ephesians 2:8-10; John 1:12; Romans 5:17)

2. Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone [i.e., only] instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love. (Romans 3:28; Galatians 5:6; James 2:17, 22, 26)

And here is the Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q. 73. How does faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?

A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receives and applies Christ and his righteousness.

Now, let me give you some more such statements from a more contemporary source. They make the very same error rejected by the Reformers and the confessions of faith declared in that era – they make the works produced by faith the full or partial basis of

justification. A few of these I have read to you before, but they bear repeating. They all come from John Piper's pen:

The crucial question is: How is Jesus **the path to perfection**? One historic answer is that Jesus himself is our perfection. That is, when we are connected with him by faith, God counts us to be perfect because of Jesus, even though in ourselves we are not. Another historic answer is that Jesus, by his presence and power within us, transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does **and move toward perfection**, which we finally obtain in heaven. It seems to me that Jesus gives us good reason to believe that both of these answers are true. John Piper (2006-09-30). What Jesus Demands from the World (Kindle Locations 2386-2390). Good News Publishers. Kindle Edition.

In relationship to him we are counted as perfect, even though we are still sinners. This is what it means to be justified. We will deal with the second answer in the next chapter, namely, that Jesus, by his presence and power within us, **transforms us so that we really**

begin to love like he does and move toward perfection. ibid, (Kindle Locations 2429-2431).

We saw in the previous chapter that the rich man who was seeking eternal life “lacked one thing.” If he “would be perfect,” he needed Jesus (Matt. 19:21). **Jesus is the path to perfection.** But how is he the path to perfection? The last chapter answered: **by being the basis of our perfection before God as we trust him.** Now we turn to another answer, which is also true: Jesus, **by his presence and power within us, transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does and move toward perfection.**

ibid, (Kindle Locations 2442-2445).

The answer of the last chapter by itself does not account fully for Jesus speaking the way he does about doing the will of God. **Jesus says that doing the will of God really is necessary for our final entrance into the kingdom of heaven.**

ibid, p. 160, (Kindle Locations 2447-2449).

There is no doubt that Jesus saw some measure of real, lived-out obedience to the will of God

as necessary for final salvation. “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). **So the second historic answer to the question, how is Jesus the path to perfection? has been that he enables us to change.** He transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does and thus move toward perfection that we finally obtain in heaven. ibid, p. 160, (Kindle Locations 2453-2456).

Therefore, Jesus does not anticipate a time in this age when we will not need daily forgiveness. That is why I say Jesus transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does so that we move toward perfection that we finally obtain in heaven. But though our lived-out perfection only comes in heaven, **Jesus really does transform us now, and this transformation is really necessary for final salvation.** But the way our new behavior is necessary is different from the way trusting Jesus for our perfection is necessary. Trusting Jesus connects us with him. Then, because of Jesus’ work alone, God counts us righteous, even before our behavior is transformed. The

tax collector who cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13) would not dare point to any righteous behavior in himself as the basis of his justification. He looked away from what he was and pled for mercy. God declared him righteous before his behavior changed. **Therefore, trusting Jesus is necessary in order to be connected to Jesus who is the foundation of our justification. But new, transformed behavior is necessary as the fruit and evidence of this connection with Jesus.**

ibid, pp. 160-61, (Kindle Locations 2459-2467).

We have seen that even though commandment-keeping will never provide a righteousness good enough to gain acceptance with God, **nevertheless, the effort to do God’s will is essential.** ibid, p. 162, (Kindle Locations 2487-2488).

Third, notice what is at stake: hell. “It is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” Many Christians who love the truth of justification by grace alone through faith alone—which I love, and

which I believe Jesus teaches (see Demand #20)—find it difficult to take these threats of Jesus at face value. But there is no way to avoid them. They are strewn throughout the Gospels, **and they clearly imply that if we forsake the battle for purity, we will perish.** ibid, p. 208, (Kindle Locations 3226-3230).

If we do not have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). **Everything we have seen in this chapter shows that Jesus is not thinking here mainly of his own righteousness that is imputed to us. He is thinking of the kind of internal transformation and external application revealed in the following six antitheses of Matthew 5:21-48.** How then do we enjoy security in Jesus when what he requires is real change of heart and real righteous behavior? I tried to answer this question especially in Demand #24. Indeed I am trying to give an answer to it throughout the book. So I close this chapter with another summary statement. Think of our sense of security—our assurance that we are going to enter the final manifestation of the

kingdom of God at the end of the age—resting most decisively on our location in God’s invincible favor, **but also on our behavioral demonstration that we are truly in that location.** ibid, pp. 208-9, (Kindle Locations 3231-3239).

What God will require at the judgment is not our perfection, but sufficient fruit to show that the tree had life—in our case, divine life. ibid, p.211, (Kindle Locations 3270-3271).

Here is a wonderfully insightful statement that summarizes Piper’s all-consuming notion of “Christian Hedonism” (delighting in God) that drives all of his teachings. The irony is, that for all of his talk about us delighting in God, in the end just like every legalist, Piper is worried that someone just might be having a good time.

“In Piper's world, we have to be skeptical and test our happiness. There's a constant fear that we might be happy for the wrong reasons, and if we are then we've abandoned God. It paints God as the demanding, strict parent who wants nothing from us but our constant attention. Yes God wants

us to glorify him and enjoy him in everything we do, but part of that is living out the way he's created us to be and interacting with the world he's given us. We don't need to escape from the things God has created, but enjoy them in a way that brings glory to him.

It seems Piper is more concerned with drawing lines around what we must not do, ever fearful we might enjoy what God has created too much, rather than seeking true joy in all that God has given us. In short, when I read Piper I feel like he's worried that somewhere out there, among all the devoted followers who read his books and hear his teaching, someone might be having a good time . . .”.

And that is precisely what the Apostle Paul tells us about the legalist:

Galatians 2:4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery--

Faith Working Through Love

Galatians 5:6-15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for

anything, but only faith working through love. (7) You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? (8) This persuasion is not from him who calls you. (9) A little leaven leavens the whole lump. (10) I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. (11) But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. (12) I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! **(13) For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (14) For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (15) But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.**

Verse 6 is a very important Scripture. You will find it applied and misapplied frequently. Misapplication of course would be the examples we have just been discussing which say that faith is necessary, but it must "work through love" as a necessary element

in our justification. We have seen that this is error and to be rejected.

But what does Paul mean then? Listen to it in context starting at 5:1 –

Galatians 5:1-6 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (2) Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. (3) I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. (4) You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (5) For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. (6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, **but only faith working through love.**

In the New Covenant, in Christ Jesus, the old Jew/Gentile distinction has disappeared. Now everyone must come to God through Christ, and that by faith alone. Listen to Paul explain this in Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:11-16 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called

the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- (12) remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (14) For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (15) by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, (16) and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Colossians 3:11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Galatians 3:27-29 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you are Christ's, then you are

Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

What matters now then is not whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile, but whether they are in Christ. And it is not by circumcision that we are in Christ, but by faith. Specifically, a faith that is characterized by “working in love.” Not by works of the law. But by works of love.

Here is Luther's comment on 5:6 –

A faith that is not hypocritical but true and lively is what exercises and requires good works through love. Anyone who wants to be a true Christian, a member of Christ's kingdom, must be a true believer. We do not believe truly if loving actions do not follow our faith. Paul excludes the Jews and all those who want to produce their own salvation, saying, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision...” – that is to say, no acts, no service, no worshipping, no kind of life in this world, but only faith, without any trust in works or merits, avails before God.

On the other hand, the apostle excludes all slothful and idle people, who say, ‘If faith justifies us without works, then let us do nothing, but let us only believe and

do what we like.’ Paul says otherwise. Although it is true that only faith justifies, here he is speaking about faith in another respect – namely, that after it has justified, it is not idle but occupied and exercises, working through love.

Paul therefore, in this verse, sets forth the whole life of a Christian – namely, that inwardly it consists in faith toward God, and outwardly in loving works to our neighbor. We are perfect Christians inwardly through faith before God, who has no need of our works, and outwardly before other people, whom our faith does not benefit, but only our love or our works.

NOTE: Let us just mark down carefully Paul’s warning in verse 9 – Galatians 5:9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

We might be tempted to think that Paul means *people* as the leaven. Bad people like these false teachers. But it is more likely that he means *the error* that these false teachers had brought to the Galatians.

“In philosophy, a small fault in the beginning is a great and foul fault in the end. So it is in theology; one little error overthrows the whole

doctrine....In the matter of faith and salvation, when people teach lies and errors under the color of the truth and seduce many people, love has no place....If we do not love God and his Word, it does not matter what or how much we love [others].” [Luther, Galatians Commentary]

This means then that when we point out what appear to be “slight” errors, we are not being unduly critical. A small thing is a big thing when it comes to truth.

When you, for example, shoot a rifle at 50 yards, it is not too difficult to place all the shots within the smallest bullseye. Perhaps the bullet holes are even touching one another. And yet, they do not go through the very same hole. Why? Because there was some minute of angle by which each shot differed. Take the target out to 100 yards and the difference is more noticeable. Take the target out far enough and eventually those shots may not even hit the target at all, even though you were being just as careful. Shoot a rocket to the moon or to Mars and see what the smallest second of a minute of angle will lead to. The planet might be missed entirely.

So it is with the gospel. The slightest pollution of the righteousness of Christ by faith alone, with our own works and so-called righteousness, introduces an

error great enough to keep us right off the mark.

No Excuse for Biting

Finally, Paul puts in this warning, lest anyone think that his opposition to works righteousness means antinomianism is acceptable. In fact, vss 13-15 really explain what Paul meant in vs 6, that faith works through love:

(13) For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (14) For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (15) But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

The Christian is free from the law as far as the conscience goes. We are no longer under its condemnation and curse. We do not relate to God through works of the law, but through our righteous standing before Him in Christ we come to Him as beloved sons.

But this freedom in Christ does not mean a freedom to disregard the moral will of God. We will strive to obey the 10 commandments because we love

God and we love our neighbor. This is called "evangelical, or gospel obedience." It is what Paul meant by "faith working through love." Anyone (as Paul says in Romans 6) who desires to use the gospel to justify continuing in sin is only showing that they are still dead to God. Sheep don't bite. Dogs and wolves do.

There it is then. Faith. Faith that is genuine necessarily bears the fruit of love for God and love for our neighbor. But it is faith alone that is the hand by which we receive the perfect and finished righteousness of Christ. Here is the Christian's assurance. YOU are not good enough. And you never will be. You have never obeyed God's law, and you never will so as to earn His acceptance. Before this day is out you will sin, and so will I. If not in deed, then surely in thought. Nevertheless, if you are in Christ by this faith that works through love, then you are fully justified before God. Christ is our righteousness.

One final note. Someone might ask, "how can I know if I am in Christ and justified?" Galatians 5:6. Do you see the habitual and increasing pattern of your life to be one of a faith that is working in love for others? Or do you see yourself most characteristically biting others? There is a most certain test.