

Liberty from the Curse of the Law

Christian Liberty

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Bible Text: Galatians 5; 1 John 3
Preached on: Sunday, January 29, 2023

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Galatians 5 beginning at verse 13, and that's on page 1,815.

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.”

The word of the Lord. [Thanks be to God.]

May we pray.

Lord, help me to speak clearly, easily understood words. Help me, Lord, to apply your word to our hearts, to explain it. Lord, we pray that this sermon will be practical and a blessing and a conviction and an encouragement. In Jesus' mighty name we pray. Amen.

Well, this is entitled “Christian Liberty” or “Liberty of Conscience, Part 2,” and I want, once again, to read from our Confession of Faith.

One of the things that I'm struck with as a Christian who was born and raised in the Presbyterian Church but did not know God and spent my teen years as a drunk—and my parents never knew it because kids can be very clever at hiding things, until I was brought home once by our family doctor, and my parents learned then and there that I was a heathen. But God converted me and after I was converted, I left the Presbyterian Church because the church I was raised in—I never remember hearing the gospel clearly spoken.

That doesn't mean it wasn't, it just means that I didn't hear it. But in the course of time, I began to discover as I studied the Bible that what we sometimes call Calvinism is actually what the Bible teaches, and I began to discover that the document that the Presbyterian Church confessed it believed: the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, was an incredible and an

amazing summary of what the Bible itself teaches. So, I'm going to read from chapter 20 and the very first paragraph, last week I read from the second one.

And here we go, "Westminster Confession of Faith of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience.

"The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel, consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love, and willing mind."

And I'm not going to read the rest of it, but I want to ponder this for a moment, because I believe before God that there is no better summary of what the Bible itself teaches than the Westminster Confession of Faith, and I discovered this as I read that document, that it is preeminently practical.

So, it is the confession of my own faith, and there was a time, the church I used to pastor, had a Sunday night service and then some of the elders got tired of coming out on Sunday night, and so they voted to end it.

and I was sitting next to an African yesterday, not an African-American, an African, Daniel Situka, who travels back and forth from Africa to America, and he's a minister in our presbytery, and there was a discussion as we examined a minister about his views of the Lord's day and he leaned over to me with a very heavy accent and he said,

"Bob," he said, "in Africa we go to church all day long. All day long. We get to church. We begin worshiping, and we don't quit worship until it's getting dark, we don't quit. So, all day long."

And I think back to horse and buggy days. The automobile has been a wonderful thing, I couldn't get here on Sunday mornings without it, but the horse and buggy lent itself to people spending the day with one another.

You know, family is nice but the family of God is so much better because a lot of times our blood kin don't know the Lord, and there are all kinds of little conflicts that get in there, jealousies over this and that, but being with the Lord's people on the Lord's Day, and for the whole day, what a wonderful, wonderful thing that is, and that is something we lost in America basically by the time of World War II.

And it's sad to me because I can't ever preach to you adequately with the little bit of time I have on Sunday morning. I used to preach 50 minutes, but I realized that when people aren't used to that, and when they're elderly, it becomes difficult. (So, I shouldn't have said elderly.)

Anyhow, so the *Confession of Faith*. So, when I taught on Sunday night, the last time I did a Sunday night series in my church, I compared the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *London Baptist Confession of Faith*, and the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, all of which hold to the basic system of doctrine. That's interesting. We're close to the Episcopalians. We're close to the Baptists. We're not as close to the Lutherans, but we are close to the Episcopalians and the Baptists and the Congregationalists (that little aside).

Now I want us to look at this verse, Galatians 5:13. He says,

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”

And last week, we talked about the importance of realizing that we should obey the government in everything they tell us to do except, where obedience to the government would result in sin on our part. Now I have concluded from that, that I sinned against God when I went along with the government's restriction on worship.

I don't think that we need to go out of our way to let the government know what we're doing, but that was the worst thing that's happened to the Christian church in my lifetime and probably in many hundreds of years, where even the Jesuit Pope let Roman Catholics not have to attend church. Wow!

So, we should obey God rather than men, but if the government commands you to do this or to do that and it's not a violation of the Bible, you should obey the government.

Now when it comes to the church, we saw that the church has no authority whatsoever to tell you to do something or to forbid you from doing something unless they can prove it out of this book.

“Show me in the word of God, pastor, where you get that idea from.” And if your pastors or elders can't show you, you're not obligated to believe it, or receive it, or do it or not do it.

So, there's a very different standard for the authority of the church in the life of a Christian as over against the authority of the government. But now you

could have gone away last Sunday and said, “Well, praise God, I’m just going to do what I want to do,” but this is the balance to it, and the balance to it is to use our freedom in Christ to serve one another in love.

Now I want to focus, this morning, on this statement in chapter 20, paragraph one that God has freed us from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, and the curse of the moral law. The curse of the moral law.

What is the moral law? Well, the moral law is summed up in the Ten Commandments. Now how could the Ten Commandments be a curse? Want to tell you how? Let’s turn over to the book of Romans for a moment, Romans 8, and let’s look here on page 1,756 where he says having gone through all the way through the end of chapter 7, he’s told us about how we cannot be saved by our own efforts, he’s told us how we’re saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, beginning in chapter 3, verse 21, all the way through the end of chapter 5, and he’s begun to talk about the Christian life in chapters 6 and 7 and 8. And as he concludes all of this, he says this to us in verse 1,

“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

Let’s think about it for a moment. He mentions the law of sin and death. The law of sin and death. What does that mean?

Here’s what it means: Every time you sin, you experience death, and every time you experience death, you’re more inclined to sin.

Now, there is that original sin when our first parents violated God’s word in the garden of Eden, and they brought war, COVID, cancer, heart disease, and all these other things on our entire family.

But in the individual life, though we are born in sin and are bent by nature to sin by original sin, yet when we as individuals sin, we experience a recapitulation of Eden. Let me say it again: When we as individuals sin, we experience a recapitulation of Eden in our own lives.

Here’s how it works. So, you lie and you’re convicted about it and you say, “Well, mm, I’m not going to confess that to God and ask his help.” So, you

lie some more, and then before long you are eligible to become a politician. [laughter] No, I'm sorry. You lie to the point that you no longer are able to tell the truth. The more you lie, the harder it is not to lie, the easier it is to lie, and if you lie enough, you can stand in front of a TV camera and no longer realize whether you're telling a lie or telling the truth. That's really true. In other words, lying begets spiritual death in the area of the truth, and the more you die spiritually, the more you're going to lie.

Let's take getting drunk. There's nothing wrong, if we look at the Scripture with having a drink of alcohol in moderation, but if you drink to excess, then it's a sin.

And there are other aspects that can make it a sin—if you become a stumbling block to somebody. But what happens when you drink more?

When I tasted my first alcohol, because my parents were teetotalers, and we didn't have alcohol in the house after daddy had been truly saved, I never tasted alcohol until I was on a high school trip.

I was in the All State Chorus, and we traveled by bus from Myrtle Beach to the state capitol of Columbia. After the chaperons went to sleep, the girls invited the boys to come to their room, and they had oranges and they had a needle, and they were taking that needle and filling it up with vodka and then sticking it in the oranges and injecting the oranges with vodka and they were eating them.

Now having read *Catcher in the Rye* and having identified with Holden Caulfield and having observed many cowboy movies, I said, "Look, let me have mine straight."

I'd never had alcohol before. And so, I had a little glass and I went into the bathroom, I wanted to observe the phenomenon. And so there I did, threw it down and went, "Ahhhh," because, you know, that stuff is potent. And I watched myself, Holden Caulfield style, in the angst of early adolescence.

And that began a three-year career of getting drunk on a very regular basis, so that I would go and buy beer before school because by the time I was in the 7th grade I was over 6' and my voice had changed. And so, I would drive the car, my mother's car, dropped her at school, I was 14, and my friends and I would go and buy beer before school and on field trips. Sometimes, one time I had a bottle of whiskey in my briefcase as we had an out-of-town trip for the high school.

What am I describing? I'm describing an experience of sin, the sin of getting drunk. It is a sin to get drunk. How do you know when you're drunk? Well,

here's the deal: If your thinking has slowed down, if you're relaxed to the point that you feel a little uneasy about what's about to come out of your mouth, then you've had too much to drink. And I observe it in other people.

You know, it's interesting if you ever go to a cocktail party to do what my son and I did when we were invited to the state Democratic Party Christmas party. Don't hold that against me.

I was invited by the state Chairman of the Democratic Party who was going to our church at the time along with the candidate for the state Republican Attorney General.

So, what do you do when you've got...? What you do is you stick to the book. That's what you do. So anyhow, I said, "Benn, I want you to observe people." They had an open bar and I said, "Watch the politicians," and what he observed was they did what I did. I had soda water with a slice of lime, and everybody thought, "Well, you know," just fit in with everybody else, but I wasn't about to have alcohol because that night we had to drive back from Baton Rouge to Alexandria. And so, what I'm getting at is, when you begin to feel that buzz, before you feel the buzz, stop because drunkenness is a sin and drunkenness can be a habit.

And that's what it was for me in high school. It was a habit getting drunk. The law of sin and death, the more you sin, the more your conscience is deadened and the easier it is to fall back into it over and over again.

Let's take not forgiving others. That's a really big one. That's worse than getting drunk and driving. You say, "Well, I don't believe that." Well, that's okay. More people are in hell today because of an unforgiving spirit than are in hell because of getting drunk. "Really?"

Yeah, because nothing will keep you out of heaven as much as a steadfast, adamant refusal to forgive others. What did Jesus tell us in the Lord's Prayer? We repeat the Lord's Prayer every Lord's Day: "Forgive us our trespasses, forgive us our debts, our transgressions, as we forgive those who trespass against us, who are debtors." And then Jesus warns us if we don't forgive others, our heavenly Father will not forgive us, and I don't know how people get around that but I'm telling you, there's no way around it. If we do not forgive others, then our heavenly Father will not forgive us (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:32-35).

Now, are we justified, are we declared righteous by forgiving others? No. We need to understand a fundamental truth and that is we are right with God solely on the basis of faith, solely on the basis of grace. By grace alone,

through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). But a faith that is alone is not real faith (Ephesians 8:10). If you're saved and you know it, then your life will surely show it. And James and Paul agree on this matter, a faith that doesn't act is no faith at all. I like to put it this way in the epistle of James 2, "We are justified by faith alone, but our faith is justified by our works alone."

What does justification mean? It means that we are declared righteous. In other words, it's a courtroom scene. God declares us forgiven; God declares us not guilty. It has to do with our standing before God, such as your standing in court.

Now, but how do we know that our faith is genuine? How can we make sure that our faith is declared to be true faith? Only by our works. Our works are the proof of our faith.

Just like the illustration I remember hearing over 50 years ago. There was a man that decided to walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls, and everybody is admiring him (and I don't know whether this story is true or not). But then he went all the way across, and he got a wheelbarrow that had removed the tire so that you had the steel rim that fit on the rope. And he said, "Now how many people believe that I can take somebody across there?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, we believe that." And he said, "Okay, come on up." You see, you only truly believe what you act on.

So, the law of sin and death is this principle: The curse of the law means that when you break the law, it has an impact on your heart. You become hardened and you become increasingly indifferent to conviction.

For example, let's take what COVID did in this country. When we stopped attending church, what happened? We got to a point where we no longer cared, in many cases, and we watched on TV in our pajamas. You know, it's nice to sit in your pajamas and sip coffee and watch church on TV, and I'm not condemning that particularly—many people need to stay home and thank God for the opportunity. But you know, how do we observe the Sabbath day?

I'll tell you the number on issue: "Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together after the manner of some" (Hebrews 10:25) And I look at the modern world and we had a discussion of this on the floor of presbytery as we were examining a man for ordination on Saturday.

What do you do with people in your church whose kids play ball, and they play ball on Sunday morning? I'll tell you what you do, you don't let them do it. You say, "Well, oh, Bob, I don't know, that's terrible! My kids will

hate me!” Well, it’s all right. You want your kids to go to hell? Leave religion up to them: “I’m not going to force my religion on my children.”

Well, you’d better because religion is being forced on your children in the public schools every day. Train up a child in the way he should go and when he’s old he won’t depart from it (Proverbs 22:6), or he may return to it, but it requires prayer.

The point I’m making is God Almighty requires of every believer to gather with other believers. Does it have to be in a building like this? No. As Pastor Situka was sharing with me about Africa where he’s from, they may walk a long distance by foot, and when they get someplace, there’s a place maybe to shelter them, maybe not. They may sit on the ground. They’re glad to be there. It doesn’t have to be in a building like this. This is not a church. This is the church. This is the building in which the church meets.

So, we don’t forsake assembling and, you know, if push comes to shove with the government and its mandates, you can gather in a home with other believers.

But for God’s sake, gather with other believers on the Lord’s Day because you need it and I need it.

You’re not going to make it, if you don’t do it with the body of Christ. That’s where you get your strength from. That’s where you get your help from. That’s where you get your joy and happiness from. But what happens is sin hardens our heart, so it isn’t long before we are indifferent. “Ah, I don’t need to do that.”

And I saw a picture on Facebook some time ago of some people at a football game, and it was snowing, and you could see them and there was snow all over them, and they were there, and they weren’t going to miss it. Yet people will miss church.

And I’m amazed, I really prayed this morning as the rain was pouring on us on I-49, “Lord, please give it enough of a break for the people to get out.” You know, in the old days when they had to hitch up the horse and buggy, they were going to ride that horse, they were going to take that buggy with the children to church. Why? Because our ancestors knew you can’t have a good society without gathering together to worship with other Christians.

The law of sin and death is about numbing us to sin, and once we become numb to sin, we sin more.

Now, the liberty that Christ has purchased for you and me is to remove that, that law of sin and death. It's to break the cycle. Jesus Christ "breaks the power of reigning sin or canceled sin," as we sang this morning. He breaks that power. So whatever thing you're dealing with today, there's power in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to deal with it, but if you don't want to deal with it, you may end up in hell.

Am I saying that your unwillingness to deal with it is going to send you to hell? No. No. No. I'm saying your unwillingness to deal with it is an example of a person maybe not really knowing the Lord.

Let's turn to 1 John 3 for a moment. 1 John 3. Listen to what he says in verse 4, page 1,901. 1 John 3:4, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." Or you could say in the King James, "Sin is the transgression of the law." And then he says in verse 5, "But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin."

Now look at verse 6. This is very important.

"No one who lives in him keeps on sinning." Now look at the second sentence there, "No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him." Look at that verse.

I remember one day, and I've counseled roughly 1,000 people in my life, and the number one reason I have is I never charged, and I never accepted money for it. I remember a drunk judge who wrote me a check because he was mad. He wasn't from our parish. He wrote a check because he was wanting to write me off and I said, "No, sir." I said, "I don't accept anything." Well, no, no. I said, "No, sir." I said, "If you want to give money to somebody, put it in your church plate." I think he was Catholic.

One day I had a Southern Baptist woman who came to see me, and I asked her, I talked to her about Christ, and she said, she told me she was an atheist. And then I began to talk about the claims of Christ, and she said, "Oh, I've been saved."

I said, "What?" She said, "I took care of that. I may be an atheist now, but I took care of it."

I want to tell you that the doctrine of walking an aisle and shaking the preacher's hand and never doubting your salvation is a doctrine of demons. If you're not living for God, you ought to question whether you're saved. Look at that verse.

Then there was another time another Southern Baptist lady came. Her friend brought her, and she was wanting to divorce her husband and so the Holy Spirit tied my tongue and what I meant to ask her was,

“Has your husband been faithful to you?”

Instead, what came out of my mouth was, “Have you been faithful to your husband?”

And she was silent and so I said to her friend who brought her to see me, I said, “Perhaps you ought to step out.”

And then unfolded the fact of this woman was a serial adulteress. She had had a number of one-night stands and a number of longer-term affairs, and she was currently in an affair. And I said, “Well, you know, you need to get right with God.” I said, “You’re on your way to hell.”

And she said, “Oh no, I’m not. I’m born again. I’m a Christian. I was saved X number of years ago, and I still go to church.” In fact, she was a church musician.

So, I said, “Well, let me ask you to do me a favor.” I picked up a Bible and I said, “I would like you to read these words to me out loud.” And these are the words she read, verse 6, 1 John 3:6,

“No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.”

And in Greek it means that if you’ve ever come to see and know the Lord Jesus Christ, it means if you can go on in sin now and never turn from it, never get right with God, it means you’ve never been saved. That’s what he’s saying.

Then I went on and I had her read verse 7, “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”

Now look at verse 9—nailed her. I mean, it nailed her. “No one who is born of God,” in other words, no one who has ever been born of God, “will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”

Verse 10, “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.”

The point again is John teaches us clearly in 1 John 1:8, and in chapter 1, verse 10, that if we say we have no sin, we're self-deceived.

So, he's not talking about never sinning, he's talking about living in sin, he's talking about going on and on and on in sin without ever asking God's help to break the power.

So now here's the proof that woman really was born again. Do you know how I know that? Because that night she repented before God. She got right with God, and she went and brought her husband against whom she had committed these adulteries to come for counseling. That was proof.

That was proof that she was a born again Christian because when she was convicted, she repented.

Remember David? David, a man after God's own heart, the greatest songwriter in the history of the world, fell into sin. He committed adultery with another man's wife and then he had the man murdered to cover it up, and then he justified his murder by saying, "Well, you know, people are killed in battle every day" (2 Samuel 11:25).

And he's living on and on in sin like that, and he ends up marrying the man's widow, until one day a man by the name of Nathan comes and confronts David. He tells him a story about a really rich man who had all kinds of sheep and goats. He was very rich, and he had a visitor come and rather than taking one of his own sheep, he went over to the poor man who had one little lamb, and that little lamb was like a daughter to him.

That lamb slept in his bosom right there beside him at night, right next to him. And he tells the story, and David immediately identified because David had been a shepherd boy. I'm sure he had a pet lamb that slept right next to him and put its little head on his shoulder. And he said the man went and stole that lamb and killed it and fed it to his guest.

And David said, "Such a man is worthy of death!" (2 Samuel 12:5) Well, he was certainly guilty, but he wasn't worthy of death. He told the story that was designed to grip David's heart, to pierce his heart, and then Nathan pointed his finger, and you've got to remember in those days, kings had the authority of life and death, and he said, "You're the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7)

And what did David do? He broke down before God. He began to cry out to God, "Lord God, forgive me!" And if you want to know what it was like—his repentance—read Psalm 32 and read Psalm 51.

The point I'm making is this: There is power even in the Old Testament in the name of the Lord to break sin, but as our Confession teaches us in strict conformity with what the Bible teaches, there's much more power available to those who believe in the Lord in the New Testament than in the Old.

There's power today. What have you got that's got you by the throat? What is it that you're struggling with, and you really don't want to deal with it?

"Ah, would you just stop, please? It's getting... It's time to stop." No, I'm not going to stop. What is it that's got you by the throat today? What is it that's a sin pattern in your life? You know it's wrong. You know it's evil. You know you need to deal with it.

"Would you just shut up, Bob! I want to go home and watch sports, or I want to not be late in the line when all the Baptists are getting out now."

No, the point of preaching is to tell you stories that connect with the Bible emotionally so that you begin to say, "Lord, it's not my brother, it's not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in need of prayer."

And here's the good news, the liberty we have in Christ: He breaks the power of reigning sin. He sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean. His blood availed for me.

And the point is this: What God offers you today, the last Sunday of the month of January 2023, he offers you full pardon. He offers you full pardon. You may have killed someone last night, and I've known murderers, you may have killed someone last night.

I can't exempt you from the worldly punishment. I can't keep you out of the gas chamber or the lethal injection room. I can't do that.

But I can tell you this: I can declare to you this very day, before you go home today, you can be right with God, and you will never have to pay for your sin of murder.

You say, "Bob, that is really extreme." If we think it's so extreme, we don't really understand the gospel. The gospel isn't how good you are; the gospel is how good Jesus was and how he died for our sins, and he died to wash them away immediately, and how he died to change us so that that power of sin would be broken in us.

"Liberty of conscience," part two: We have that cancellation of that curse of the law that binds us to more lawlessness and more lawlessness. Every time we sin, it gets harder and harder to get out. It's like driving your car and

getting it stuck, and you try, and you try to get your car out of there, and you just can't do it.

I once got my daddy's car so stuck, I tried everything I could try. And finally I walked, found a phone, and got a wrecker to pull me out, and I never did tell daddy.

The point is when you try to do it on your own, you can't do it. You can't do it. But there's power in the name of the Lord for you to be set free from whatever it is, and all the regrets of the past, they're over. They're done. That's why Christ has died so that we might enjoy Christian liberty, liberty of conscience.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray that you would bless each of us today as we reflect on our lives.

Lord, I thank you for Friday night when the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ocean Springs, Scott Castleman, preached a very soul-searching sermon about his own experience and then applying it to other pastors.

Lord, I have to say that before I took Communion Friday night, I had to do some soul-searching, and I had to do some repenting, and I had to ask your forgiveness.

Lord, I pray that you would grant that for all of us that we would truly be free in Christ with that liberty he's purchased for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.