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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.

“Law or Promise: It’s One or the Other”

December 29, 2013

Sermon Text: Galatians 5:1-15

Scripture Reading: Mark 10:17-31

Introduction-

As we have been studying Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia, the Apostle has made it very evident to us that there are two ways. One leads to life. The other to condemnation and death. One way is the Law. The other is the Promise – or the Gospel.

Two ways, both of which offer a righteous standing before God, yet they are radically different paths. The Law says “do this and you will live.” The Promise, in contrast, says “I have done it all for you. Believe it and by faith receive this righteousness in Christ.”

Two ways.

Now, both the Law and the Promise have their purpose. We do not discard the Law – but we must use it rightly, for the purpose that God has given it.

Galatians 3:19-22 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. (20) Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. (21) Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. (22) But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin,

so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

And again:

Romans 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. (20) For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

And still again:

Romans 7:7-13 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (8) But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. (9) I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. (10) The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (11) For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and

through it killed me. (12) So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (13) Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

And we saw the same thing in 1 Timothy 1 where Paul reminds us that the law must be used lawfully. That is for the wicked, and that there are false teachers who wrongly apply it to the righteous. That is what was happening to the churches of Galatia – false teachers had crept in and were working to bring these newly professed Christians back under the bondage of the law. But in Christ we die to the law. It no longer has demands upon us. In Christ we are perfectly righteous before God – justified by faith alone.

Galatians 2:19-20 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. (20) I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The Christian's life starts by faith alone, and it continues by faith alone. *The life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.* The Galatians were stumbling at this point:

Galatians 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Two ways. Two choices.

The Condemnation of the Law

Let's spend some time now considering life under the law. Perhaps some of you are not in Christ. I hope that everyone here is in Christ, but we dare not grow careless in mere assumptions where eternity is involved. We know that human beings are quite capable of being very religious and moral, very "Christian" and yet not know Christ at all. Such people are still trusting in the law. In the end, it is to their own efforts and works that they turn to merit God's approval.

So let's speak to such a person now.

Paul has said this:

Galatians 3:10-12 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the

Law, and do them." (11) Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." (12) But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."

The one who DOES them shall live. But it doesn't work. Never. Ever. "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by ALL things written....! ALL THINGS. How well are you doing?

Consider the Law's requirements even further:

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

The Law is spiritual. It cannot be obeyed by our flesh. It cannot be obeyed as God demands that it be obeyed unless that obedience proceeds from the spirit – from the heart. You see this in the Sermon on the Mount-

Matthew 5:18-22 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (19) Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches

them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (20) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (21) "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' (22) But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

And this is the purpose of the 10th commandment – to show us that the Law requires heart obedience, not mere external motion:

Exodus 20:17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

This is the commandment Paul goes to in order to show us that it was here that he himself realized that for all of his zealous and careful law-keeping, he failed to merit righteousness before God.

Romans 7:7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no

means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

This is the terrible demand of God's holy and perfect law. It is unrelenting. It is unbending and it will make NO exceptions. Do not think that yours will be a special case. The Law is terrible in its holiness. This is why Mt. Sinai shook and smoked, and why the voice of the Lord was a terror to the Israelites.

And the purpose in all of this is to lead the sinner to come to the end of his trust in himself and his workings. The Law is given to kill self-righteousness, and to take the sinner to utter despair. Want to see proof of this? –

Hebrews 12:18-21 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest (19) and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. (20) For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." (21) Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

But the person who still refuses Christ IS at that same terrible mountain. This description is what that person can expect, with no doubt, from God. A terrifying sight. A voice so fearful that those who hear it will plead and beg for it to stop.

Let me ask you plainly – have you ever been brought to the end of yourself? Or are you still trusting in yourself, foolishly maintaining that YOU alone, of all human beings in history, have achieved righteousness before God apart from Christ?

Make no mistake. Our Christian churches are full of such people. They think they are better than Paul. No – they think they are better than Christ, having no need of His perfections.

And here is the end of all such people:

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Children and young people – you will not find that you are an exception to this. The Law of God has no mercy upon someone just because they are a child. Why do I say this?

“For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’”

Think of this. No one, man or animal, was to touch the mountain where God would come down and give the Law, upon penalty of death. If a cow or a dog happened to wander over, was it doing so in defiance of God? Of course not. Yet it was held accountable. How much more then does the Law hold a child accountable who is capable of at least understanding – “you shall not touch the mountain” but does it anyway?

Children, I am particularly concerned about you, though these things surely apply as well to any adult here who thinks themselves to be quite acceptable to God on their own merits. But children – it is very, very dangerous for you to remain children in your thinking about these things. Your parents and other adults might let you off many times, saying “well, he/she is just a kid.” But the Law will never do that. If you die, even as children die, and you still think that God sees you as “just a kid” who “does kid things” and that the Lord

Jesus died only for really bad people, then you are going to end in hell.

Are you mean to your brothers and sisters? Are you selfish? Do you disobey your parents? Is this who you are and are these the things that you do regularly? Then do not think that just because you are a kid and these are the things that kids do, God doesn't see them as serious. Let me show you –

2 Timothy 3:1-5 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. (2) For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, **disobedient to their parents**, ungrateful, unholy, (3) heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, (4) treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

And this is what the Law of God has to say about children who are disobedient to their parents:

Exodus 21:15 "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son

who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, (19) then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, (20) and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' (21) Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

So, children – have you ever come to realize that God's Law demands your death? When you disobey your parents, you strike them. God's Law curses you and demands that you be sent to hell. That is the Law. There are no exceptions to it.

And yet knowing these things, do you go about your life every day, happy with who you are, laughing and clowning around, just seeing how you can have fun and have a good time? Not worried at all. Perhaps stealing things. Thinking that it is just pretty cool to disobey your parents and get away with it. Hiding things that only you know about. Being rude and unloving to your brothers and sisters.

Do you do these things and yet you are not worried at all because after all, you are just a kid and God will let you into His kingdom no matter what?

If this is you – if I have just described you – then you need to be very, very frightened. Just as frightened as an adult who thinks that they are good enough for God. Why?

Because the law of God is unforgiving. The law never bends. It never lets one single sin go unpunished. It never has and it never will.

Children. Adults. Young people. Men. Women. Are you terrified yet? Or do you imagine that I am exaggerating the case, and so you are giving yourself an escape route? “Oh, you know these preachers! They have to let loose with this hellfire and brimstone stuff once in a while.” Do you think this? Then listen to Christ and be terrified further:

Matthew 5:18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

I am particularly concerned because I know that for years and years as a child and young person – and even in my early adulthood – I really was never terrified by the Law. I thought

with a dangerous assumption – that I was really just a pretty good person. In particular I was good because I went to church, I was raised in church, I accepted Jesus when I was 8 by walking forward up the church aisle, our family had no beer in the refrigerator....

And yet when no one was looking, I was mean to my sisters. I stole money from my mom’s jar of quarters. I pulled pranks that damaged other people’s property and thought it was funny, *and all the while I was sure that God approved of me because, after all, I was ME!* If God had chosen to take me out of this world then, I would be in hell right now. I had not yet been terrified by the Law.

Now, you might be saying to yourself right at this moment – *but what about the gospel? Didn’t Jesus die on the cross? Doesn’t He invite everyone to come to Him and be forgiven and saved – so why don’t you tell us about Him? Why are you scaring the little children?*

Because right now, I am speaking to those of you who might be secure in your own supposed self-made righteousness. I am speaking to anyone here who is like a man I once knew back in Montana. I was teaching about the perfect holiness of God and how the Lord in His Law requires

perfection of us or we will end in hell. And that man said “No, that cannot be. None of us are perfect. You are misrepresenting God.”

That man had never been terrified by the thundering of the Law, you see. And he never was. He went on to walk in adultery and sin, right up until the time he died. And yet he was a member of the church, a professing Christian. But he ended in hell, and of that I have no doubt.

You see, men and women and children, it is very possible to SAY that you have faith in Christ, and yet to TRUST in your own works –

Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: (8) "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; (9) in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

If you are one of these, if you are talking up a religious storm and saying all kinds of Bible words and speaking as if you know Christ, but in fact your heart is far from Him, then you are under the law. You are not a son of Abraham in Christ. And if you are under the law, you are cursed before God.

Are you terrified now? May the Spirit of God terrify you, so that you hear those same horrible thunderings of His Law. May he show you that without Christ, you are a prisoner awaiting judgment. A slave who has no inheritance or place in God’s kingdom.

Because until you are so terrified, until you are brought to the end of yourself and trust in your own “goodness,” you will never see Christ and His beauty. You will never see your need for Him. I pray that even this very evening, anyone here who is dead in sin, playing the hypocrite and deceiving themselves, will not be able to sleep. That the Lord would awaken you to the great peril that you are in so that you might feel the shaking mountain and smell its smoke, and see your sin.

Then you will be ready to hear the gospel – the glorious good news of a righteousness that can be yours simply for the receiving by faith in Christ. But that hope is not yet for you, as long as you are comfortable and secure in your life apart from Christ.

Listen to this great insight from Wilhelm Walther as he writes about the proper application of the Law and of the Gospel-

“...We can model our preaching on our dear Lord Jesus Christ. If we study His behavior in the Gospel records, we

will find that whenever He meets secure sinners—such as the self-righteous Pharisees of His day—He does not have a drop of comfort to offer them. Rather, He calls them serpents and a vipers’ brood, denounces a tenfold woe against them, reveals their nasty hypocrisy, sends them to hell, and tells them that they will not escape eternal damnation.

Although He knows that these very same people will nail Him to the cross, He fearlessly tells them the truth. That is a very important point for us preachers to note. Even though we know in advance that we will share the same fate of our Lord Jesus, we must preach the Law in all its severity to secure, reckless sinners, to hypocrites, and to people who are our enemies. Now, I do not mean to say that we would be able to endure what our Lord endured. We cannot drink the cup that He drank. But we will feel the hatred of people. They will either oppose us openly or continually plot against us in secret. There is no way out of this difficult situation. Whenever a preacher faces these kinds of people, he dares not preach anything other than the Law to them.

Moreover, when he preaches before a crowd, his hearers need to get the impression that what he says does not apply to all of them indiscriminately, but only to the would-be righteous—

those who claim the Gospel for themselves. Matt. 11:28 True, our Lord says, “Come to Me, all,” but He immediately adds: “who labor and are heavy laden.” Thus He serves notice upon secure sinners that He is not inviting them. They would only mock Him if He were to lay His spiritual, heavenly treasures before them.

Mark 10:17 On a certain occasion a rich young man approached Jesus and said to Him: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus rejected the title “Good Teacher” because it would have put Him in the same class with the self-righteous young man, who considered himself to be a “good teacher.” The rich young man was not sincere when he addressed the Lord in this manner. If he had regarded Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, if he had believed in Christ and for that reason had called Him “Good Teacher,” it would have been quite proper. But because he merely meant to offer the Lord a bit of flattery, Christ declined the title.

Luke 10:25–27 And what does the Lord do next? He asks the young man a counterquestion: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” Then the young man replies with great passion, quoting the main passages of the Law, and says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and

with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

Luke 10:28; Matt. 19:20 And the Lord says, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” Oh, the young man replies, “All these I have kept.” What the young man means to say is this: “If You have no other teachings to propose, You are not as wise as some consider You to be. What You just told me I have known for a long time. I thought I would get all kinds of new teachings from You. What else do I need?”

How does Christ answer the young man’s last question? Does He say, “What you lack is faith”? By no means. Since He is dealing with a miserable, secure, and self-righteous person, He does not preach one word of Gospel to him. Even though He knows in advance—by reason of His omniscience—that all His efforts will have no success, He feels that He must first bring the young man to a realization of his spiritual misery.

Matt. 19:21–22 God, in His love, does many things that to us may seem useless so that on Judgment Day no one would have an excuse for not coming to faith in Christ. God will say to many, “This and that I did for you, but you rejected Me.” Accordingly, Jesus says to the rich young man, “If

you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

Now the record states: “When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” He departed with a guilty conscience, which, no doubt, told him: “That is, in fact, a different doctrine from the one I used to hear. What He is telling me I cannot do. I have become too greatly attached to my possessions. I would rather give up my fellowship with Him than to do what He says. I am not going to roam around the country with Him like a beggar.”

Probably his conscience also testified to him that, according to the teaching of Christ, he was damned, that he was on his way to hell. That was the effect that the Lord had intended to produce when He dealt with the young man. Whether he was converted later, we do not know, nor is that relevant at this time. The point is that here we have an example that guides us when we are dealing with people who are still secure in their sins and self-righteous. True, we cannot give orders as did Christ, the Lord of lords. But there are enough questions that we can ask to make this kind of person realize that he is still deeply steeped in sins and a lost creature.

Ferdinand, Carl; Wilhelm Walther (1905-07-02). Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible (Kindle Locations 4940-4994). Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

Christian, Stand Firm in Freedom

Let's conclude with just an introductory remark about the first 6 verses of chapter 5, which contain a warning and comfort for the Christian:

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.

Here is the good news – If you are in Christ, no longer under the law, then you are free. Free of the law's condemnation and curse. Free of any debt owed to the Lord. We have been listening to Luther of late and being helped to understand how to put on the Lord Jesus Christ by turning to His righteousness in faith when accusations of the enemy come against us.

But notice here that Paul is warning us not to be drawn into that slavery again by listening to the false gospel of legalism. Don't be enslaved.

We will have to look closer at these verses to really understand what Paul means when he says to these professing Christians that they are "severed from Christ" if they turn back to the Law for justification. But I believe we can say this about it at this point:

"A Christian can be severed from the comfort of grace and be brought under slavery to the Law's condemnation if he yields to a false gospel of works."

That is to say, if we slip back into the thinking that our daily standing before God is based upon our own performance, then the peace and joy and freedom that is ours in Christ is going to elude us. How many

Christians unnecessarily live this way with a yoke around their neck that they don't need to wear?

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