



Pentecost 17

October 1, 2017 – 10:15 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: Sola Gratia—“Grace Alone”!

Sermon Text: Galatians 4:21-23, 31, 5:1

²¹ Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³ His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

³¹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

5 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Sunday Worship Service: 10:15 A.M. (Sunday School/Adult Bible Study 9 am)

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He had no one to help him become a lawyer or a politician. He wasn't interested in the army. He had no desire to be a doctor. So, the only obvious career move in those days for a man of his background was to become a clergyman in the Church of England. He tried to make himself acceptable to God by keeping the whole law, inwardly and outwardly. He rose early, prayed, denied himself and tried to earn forgiveness and peace by increased effort. But he *"groaned under a heavy yoke."*

On 24 May 1738, at 8.45 am he heard someone reading a book by the great reformer, Martin Luther. He later recalled, *"While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given [to] me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."* John Wesley became one of the greatest preachers ever, preaching over 40,000 sermons centered on freedom through faith in Jesus Christ. He had, as he put it, *"exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son."* He was free at last. "Freedom" is the word that best sums up the Christian life.

In our culture, freedom is often understood as being able to do whatever you want, how you want, when you want. But when you live like that, you don't necessarily *feel* truly free. According to Paul's teaching in today's passage, freedom comes through Jesus Christ. His message is that you aren't "born free." In order to be free, you must be "born again." True freedom is found in a life of faith in Christ. Many ideas of freedom fail because they don't realize the true nature of our captivity.

The title of the film *Cry Freedom* expresses something we all long for. Whether it's racial and political freedom (as in the case of this film), free speech, free assembly, free worship, a free conscience, or economic freedom and individual freedom, the whole world cries out for freedom. All of these forms of freedom are important, but you can have them all and still be in slavery. Alternatively, you can have none of them but still be free. The gospel contains within it the promise of other forms of freedom, but it begins with a freedom that's more profound than any other.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," Paul writes in the closing words of our sermon text for today. Jesus sets us free to live a life of freedom, faith and love through the Spirit. Paul's opponents, 'the Judaizers', boasted about the fact that they were Abraham's children. Paul used an allegorical argument to confront them. Paul told his opponents that there are two ways in which we can live – in bondage or in freedom. He explains that there are two covenants: "You boast of being Abraham's children – but Abraham actually had two children – one in bondage and one in freedom." True descent from Abraham is not physical, but spiritual. In this case, it's not enough to have Abraham as your father. The crucial question is, "Who's your mother"? Is it **"Hagar"** or is it **"Sarah"**?

Paul argued that by his opponents' insistence keeping the Law in order to be in a right relationship with God, they were, in fact, children of **"Hagar."** This analogy represents the old covenant, the present city of Jerusalem, Ishmael, the child of the flesh, and a life of bondage. This is the life John Wesley experienced before his conversion. It is a life of frustration and failure, confusion and defeat.

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To be a Christian, on the other hand, is to be a child not only of Abraham, but also of Sarah. Sarah represents the new covenant, the new Jerusalem—“the Jerusalem that is above,” Isaac—the “child of promise,” and the freedom that is in Christ. This is what Wesley experienced the day he trusted in Christ and Christ alone for salvation. His heart was “*strangely warmed*.” This is the way of peace, joy and freedom. Paul pointed out that just as Ishmael ridiculed Isaac (cf. Genesis 21:9), the Galatians who are “born by the power of the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29) shouldn’t be surprised that they are being persecuted by these ‘Judaizers’. He concluded his argument in this section by saying, **“We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”** He continued, **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”**

“Circumcision” was the theological symbol representing a religion of law. Paul argued that to add circumcision is to lose Christ. To seek to be justified by works is to fall away from grace. The Christian life is a life of faith. We don’t **work** for our salvation; we **wait** for it. While we wait, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love,” Paul went on to say.

So ask yourself: Whose child am I? Am I a child of **“Hagar”** or a child of **“Sarah”**? Has your heart, like John Wesley’s heart, been “*strangely warmed*” by God’s grace? Have you, like the great Reformer Martin Luther, come to believe that you are saved only because of what God’s dear Son, Jesus, the Christ, did for you? Or are you still struggling—like both Wesley and Luther did before the Holy Spirit brought them to that realization—to do whatever you can do to add to what Christ already did for you? Or you free? Or are you still a slave to works righteousness? Do you wrestle with thoughts like, “*If only I prayed more;*” or, “*If I could just get this one pet sin out of my life for good, then I know that God would accept me as His child;*” or, “*If I just had purer motives for the good works I do, rather than having in the back of my mind when I do or say something kind that I should—at the very least—get a thank-you for my troubles*”? Or you **“free”** or are you a **“slave”**?

If thoughts like these trouble your conscience—and, admittedly, such thoughts trouble all of our consciences from time to time, if not regularly—then we need to return to what Paul says in the closing words of our text: **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”** “*In the light of his experience, Luther used to remark of the Law, ‘Says the Law: “It is a great mountain, and you must get over it.” “I will get over it,” says presumption. “You cannot do it,” says conscience. “Then I will let the matter rest,” says despair.*” (Koestlin-Kawerau, *Martin Luther*, I, 70.). That was the Reformer’s take on it.

So what’s our take on it, fellow heirs of the Reformation, “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” of heaven’s “glory” (Rom. 8:17)? The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8-10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” SOLA GRATIA!—grace alone—was a hallmark of Luther’s theology. As a diligent student of Scripture, Luther came to the glorious realization that all of his striving, fasting, prayers and even self-mortification couldn’t atone for a single sin he’d committed or imagined he’d committed.

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Luther was studying Paul's inspired words in [Romans 1:17](#)--"For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" —when the Spirit brought that truth home to him. He exclaimed of that moment:

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement that "the just shall live by faith." Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

Rejoice with Wesley and with Luther that the Holy Spirit kindled the spark of saving faith in your heart, friend, whether at the baptismal font or through the plain words of Scripture! Praise God that He saw fit, for reasons known only to Him, that He chose you to be one of His dear children even before He created the world! Adore the Lord for your parents or pastors or Sunday School teachers or a next-door neighbor or a childhood friend who first introduced you to Jesus and for your fellow believers who've continued to support, encourage, comfort and correct you along your path of faith in Christ! We're saved! Saved from sin, from death and from the power of the devil by God's undeserved love for us in Christ Jesus! Celebrate God's amazing grace; revel in it; share it with others, so that they, too, can be clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness and become heirs with you of eternal life in heaven! What a way to keep Luther's gospel heritage alive today.

Grace alone! **SOLA GRATIA!** Amen.

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