

The Smalcald Articles

*Galatians 5:1-6; from the series, "What Does It Mean to Be Lutheran?"
Message from the Master broadcast October 28, 2007 by Pastor Jeremy Mattek*

Atop the hill in Washington, D.C. stands the Capitol Building of the United States of America. The cornerstone was laid in 1793, but the crowning touch, is the statue on top of the rotunda known as the "Freedom Lady" that was placed there in 1863. The Freedom Lady, stands nearly 20 feet tall (that's some lady), and stands proudly atop the dome. A crest of stars frames her face. A shield of Stars and Stripes is in her left hand.

Sculpted in Rome, "the Lady" was brought to America aboard a sailing ship. During the trip across the Atlantic Ocean, a fierce storm developed. The Captain ordered cargo thrown overboard to lighten the load. The sailors wanted to throw the heavy statue overboard, but the captain refused, shouting over the wind, "No! Never! We'll flounder before we throw 'Freedom' away." And so, "Freedom" was saved, and the statue stands above the dome today, because one man stood for "Freedom."

Galatians chapter five says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free." Of course, the freedom Christ promises is a freedom that goes well beyond the freedoms of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness we enjoy as Americans. The freedom Christ gives is a freedom for your heart. It is a pure freedom in the soul. It eases your conscience, rests your mind, makes you look forward to your judgment and smile, without a worry in your heart or a doubt in your mind. It lets you walk every second closer to your day of reckoning with a freedom in your gut the birds feel when soaring on the wind. And you would think that people would stand through any storm and sacrifice any other earthly cargo than give up this freedom.

But not everyone does. In the history of the world, not everyone has. Sometimes freedom gets thrown overboard. One such example was in 1537. Elector John Frederick of Saxony had asked Dr. Martin Luther to prepare a written defense against what many believed were abuses of Christian freedom by the Roman Catholic church. It was believed that the Roman church was taking the "free" out of Christian freedom. Some would say the church was even taking the "Christ" out of Christian by taking away the feeling of freedom in your soul and replacing it with a heavy load of laws and restrictions on your back. What Martin Luther prepared in defense of Christian freedom became known as the Smalcald Articles.

Abuse of Christian freedom, however, was not limited to the 1500s. As we'll talk about today, the Apostle Paul dealt with much the same issue – different sins, but similar attacks on the free forgiveness won by Christ Jesus.

And, in case you were wondering, we still must still stand up for freedom today. The sinful heart's desire to reject any truth of Christ and deny that we even need what Christ so freely gives is just as strong and deadly as it was during the times of Martin Luther and the Apostle Paul.

I suppose before we go any further we need to define what freedom, exactly, Christ sets us free from. If you make a tour of Christian churches across denominations or simply turn on whichever televangelist happens to have found time on your television, you may become a bit confused.

I once visited a church that spent an hour and a half preaching that Christ primarily came to give people financial freedom. You can turn on the news and see guys like Jesse Jackson talking about political freedom in the name of Jesus. You attend protests and see ministers advocating individual freedoms. And you can see these freedom in the name of Jesus messages are well-received by a whole lot of people. The church I went to was packed. The crowds on tv are huge. But there's a problem with them. They're not setting you free from your biggest problem.

Your biggest problems are not financial. They're not political. They have nothing to do with your in-laws, neighbors, or kids; hurricanes, tornadoes. Long after this world ends; after every hanging chad and dollar bill is burned up; after every rebuilt house is destroyed along with the world, you will still have your soul, which is eternal. And, as of the moment you're born, your soul belongs to the devil.

Do you want proof that you're born as a child of the devil? The name devil means liar, which means when you do the same you also deserve the name. The name Satan means enemy, which is what you are to God when you steal, hurt, lust, lie, or anything else the law of God decries. The pleasure of the devil is sin, the same pleasure you have a record of indulging in. The home of the devil is hell, the fire created as home for all who sin. Your biggest problem is eternal. Your sins chain you to the same eternal fire the devil is bound to and will suffer through for committing the same rebellions against God that you do.

A balanced checkbook can't take that away. Neither can moral societies or equal rights for men,

women, children, and unborn babies, which is why the devil often grants success to those who use the name of Jesus to promote these freedoms.

Talking about these earthly, political, financial, communal freedoms means people aren't hearing about and aren't believing in the freedom that Jesus actually gives; the freedom Jesus gives you to stand in front of God after this world is long gone, hear him read off all your haneous, hidden, public, private, fleshly, forgotten about sins, see him raise up his righteous right hand take a swing and strike Jesus with the sting of that swing while pointing to heaven with the other hand and telling you to walk right on in.

Jesus set you free from God's wrath by becoming the object of God's wrath. He set you free from the burden of living up to God's law by having God judge his obedience to that law. Jesus set you free from the terror of your sins by taking on the punishment for your sins. Jesus set you free from the horror of your death by proving his supremacy over death. Jesus set you free from the scare of the devil by crushing the head of the devil and creating in you the power to say no to the devil. Those are all very powerful enemies of yours; the law, sin, death, and the devil; but all are less powerful than your Lord.

That's the only freedom that takes care of you forever. That's the only Christ Paul wants you to rejoice in because it's the only freedom that's certain. Any other job you add to him or requirement you place on those who follow him takes away from him and threatens your salvation. It's happened before to some very well-intentioned Christians.

Paul wrote Galatians to a church in the city of Galatia, thus the name. There was one church, but it was made up of two very different kinds of people. There was the Jewish group, who had grown up with all the Old Testament sacrifice laws, cleanliness laws, ceremonial laws, circumcision laws. And there was the Gentile group, who had grown up with absolutely no religious laws.

For the Jews, their circumcision law was especially significant for them. It was the sign of God's covenant with them, all the way back to Abraham. They wanted their new Gentile brothers to experience that significant divine covenant. So they didn't accept any Gentile believer or his family until he removed the foreskin from his body. And it irked them when some Gentiles refused. And I bet it irked them a bit more when Paul flat out told the Gentiles not to do it.

Now, there is nothing wrong with circumcision. God told his Israelites it was their law, and God doesn't make bad laws. The vast majority of males today are circumcised, and that's fine. There's nothing wrong with the deed here, but there was plenty wrong with how the deed was being used. The Jews were telling the Gentiles that Jesus Christ, as he comes to you, is incomplete. The identity Jesus gives you is not enough. There's something missing, something he missed, something he didn't take care of, something you have to add on because Jesus, by himself, didn't cut it.

The Smalcald Articles address this too. The Roman church was telling Christians the same thing, that Jesus and everything he freely gives you is not enough. "Yea, Jesus is very necessary and good," they would say. "But his work is not complete unless you buy a mass, honor a relic, purchase an indulgence, or, (if you're really dedicated) leave your family and become a priest. You may be partly Christian, but won't be fully Christian unless you pray to saints, and honor the pope, and try to buy God off with doing enough good and avoiding enough bad." If you did these things, the church was happy. But if you didn't, well, the church looked down on you.

What an abuse of freedom, Luther wrote. Where does Christ command any of these things? Where does Christ give anyone the right to look down on someone for not doing these things? The answer is: nowhere. He didn't say any of this. What the Word says is that our salvation is certain only because of the suffering and blood of the innocent Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Christ, and his work alone, fully sets us free.

But even we struggle with this. Let me ask you a question. What irks you about other people in the church? What irritates you? Don't pretend there's nothing that gets your blood boiling. The Jews judged the Gentiles on the basis of circumcision. What do you judge on? How often they volunteer? How much money someone gives, or doesn't give? Clothes, how nice they aren't or how over-the-top they are? Level of education? Spiritual gifts? Does it bug you when someone brings a coffee mug into the sanctuary?

If your basis for Christianity is anything except Jesus Christ, if you say Jesus plus circumcision, Jesus plus committee work, Jesus plus a certain offering, Jesus plus a dress code, you are creating the same struggle Paul and Luther dealt with, implying that when Jesus said he came to seek and to save the lost, he failed.

Do you know why the Jews felt so comfortable telling the Gentiles they had to be circumcised? The Jews were already circumcised. They were good at it. Think about what irks you about others in the church

or within Christianity. You're good at it, aren't you? Or you think you'd be good at it if given the opportunity. You want others to judge you on that basis, on that law, because you know you'd pass.

Do you want to be judged by that law? That's your choice, but you should know what the reality is when you make that choice.

A guy was driving home from college one weekend evening when a police officer pulled him over. The officer said, "I had you clocked at 93 mph. The speed limit is 65. I also noticed you weren't wearing your seatbelt, you have a taillight out, and your plates are expired." "Sir," the guy said, "I understand that, but I was driving within the lines, I've been using my signal to switch lanes and keeping a safe distance between me and any car in front of me." Why did this guy still get a ticket? You can't pick and choose which specific laws you can be judged on.

Maybe you're a fine dresser, maybe you're a great giver, maybe you're a wonderful church worker, maybe you have a kind voice, but God doesn't obligate you to just one law. He never says that. He obligates you to every single law. If you want to be judged by a law, know that you are asking God to judge you on the entire law, every little law, every big mistake, every innocent lie. Any one of them will condemn you if the law is the standard you want to be judged by.

If you wish to be judged by the law, any law, you are saying that you deserve God's love. And if you believe that you deserve God's love then his undeserved love is completely unnecessary, which means you believe you don't need his grace.

Don't listen to that voice. You have a whole world history telling you that you need God's grace. When Adam and Eve chose their will over God's will in the garden, it was grace that saved them. When the Israelites complained every day about the wilderness to which God led them, it was grace that spared them. When they built a golden statue of a cow and called it their god, it was grace that continued to lead them. When they arrested his son, beat him bloody, and left his dead skin hanging on a cross, it was grace that said, "Father, forgive them." For all the times we raise up ourselves at the expense of him, for the times we place guilt on someone else for something not commanded by him, it is grace that assures us that, if we ever slip back into those sins, they have all been forgiven by him. We are fully free only by grace. We only have what we have by grace – our lives, our hope, our future, our freedom, and our faith, which is so vital for hanging onto grace.

Do you want to hear some good news? 2.1 billion people in the world call themselves Christians. That's a lot of people. Do you want to hear some more good news? There are 122,000 Christian baptisms every day. How about some more? Christianity is represented on every continent and within most every nation on earth. That's good news.

Now the bad news. Do you know what percent of world-wide Lutherans believe that the good things you do, your good works, are what get you into heaven? 79%.

Apparently, there are many who believe the same lies as the churches in Rome and Galatia. It's sad how many people believe they have to take the burden of their salvation on themselves, how many believe that all these laws are necessary because Jesus wasn't enough, because faith in Jesus isn't enough, because the comfort Jesus gives is not enough.

But it is. Galatians chapter 5 does not say that your salvation is "by faith and works," "by faith and deeds," "by faith and circumcision, indulgences, or anything else." It only says the pure comfort of faith, because God doesn't want you to doubt.

If you lay the burden of your salvation on your shoulders you are only left with doubt. You'll always wonder, "Have I done enough good? Have I avoided enough bad? Have I repented enough? Prayed enough? Dressed well enough? Given enough?" Guess what? God never tells you. And because God never tells you, you'll never know. And if you never know, then you'll always doubt. And if you always doubt, then you'll always fear. And if you always fear, then you are far from free. But Jesus came to set you free. And he did just that, which is why he tells you, "Simply believe."

The Jesus of Scripture is the Jesus of all comfort and complete freedom, with no extra commands. He is all grace, with nothing you can add on. He is received only and purely by faith, which comes to you only and purely through the Word of God, which cannot change, and on which we firmly stand, fully forgiven, and forever free.

Lord Jesus, we praise you for your gracious work on our behalf. Rightly, the burden of sin ought to

fall squarely on our shoulders and crush our souls. Yet, because of your great love for us, you carried that burden and set our souls free. May we use the freedom we enjoy as citizens of heaven not to burden our brothers and sisters, but to encourage them, strengthen, and comfort them, until we all find ourselves fully enjoying the freedom of our true home in heaven. We pray in your name. Amen.