

Christian Freedom

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I. Freedom in Christ

1. Teachings of the Epistle to the Galatians

APOSTLE PAUL HAD VISITED GALATIA on his mission trips. The Galatians had received faith with joy. Very shortly afterwards the news about Christians in Galatia became alarming. For this reason, Paul wrote a letter to circulate among the congregations in the area. We know this letter as the Epistle to the Galatians in the Bible. He expressed his concern about the faith life of the Galatians: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4)

Law-minded Jewish Christians believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah, but demanded circumcision from the Gentile Christians. Paul boldly fought for the pure doctrine. He rebuked the Galatians and proclaimed the Jewish Christians' doctrine as false. When rebuking and warning the Galatians, Paul did not forget to support and strengthen those who desired to endeavor according to the teachings of God's Word and the Holy Spirit. The Epistle to the Galatians defines the borders of doctrine which is also relevant in our time. Paul draws the border between the Law and the Gospel in his letter. He emphasizes that man is justified by faith alone, by the merit work of Christ.

2. Teachings of Luther

One of the significant philosophers during the time of the Reformation was the Catholic Erasmus of Rotterdam. According to Erasmus, man has so much free will in relation to God that he can choose salvation. Martin Luther disagreed. He had tried to save himself in the monastery by doing good works. When Luther did not succeed in his attempts, he ended up in deep despair and thought that God had predestined him to condemnation. Having found a merciful God, Luther could not compromise over the doctrine of the righteousness of faith. In defending it he wrote, among other writings, the book, *The Bondage of the Will* (1524). In his book Luther teaches that as the result of the Fall into sin man's will is corrupted. Because of Adam's fall man has lost his freedom. Thus, it is useless to claim that man would have freedom to make decisions regarding his relationship with God. It would be equally pointless to call a person healthy if he has lost his health. A person cannot on his own initiative achieve a relationship with God. We can learn to know God only as He reveals himself to us. The salvation of man is completely the work of God. Luther referred to the words of the Apostle Paul, according to which the knowledge of sin comes through the law, but not the ability to fulfill the law (Rom. 3:20). The law reveals to a person that he or she needs the gospel. Based on one's own works, a person's conscience is always left in the state of uncertainty. No matter how perfect works man thinks he does, he can never be convinced in his innermost heart that they are sufficient to God.

According to Luther, the believer knows that he is surely secure, for his salvation is entirely in God's hands. He condensed his teachings of the bondage of the will in the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot of my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me by His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith...." From Jesus' own teachings we can read that man's salvation is completely God's work, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). "This is the work of

God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (John 6:29). "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44).

Luther illustrated the forgiveness of sins with metaphors. When a penitent sinner is forgiven all his sins by grace, the Word and faith renew his soul. They shape the soul as the iron heated in the fire becomes flexible. Luther also compares the joining of the soul and Christ with the joining of the bride and the groom. The result of this marriage is that

When the soul and Christ become one, all human qualities, including sins, become Christ's own. In turn, the riches of God and Jesus become man's own. Luther calls this a joyful exchange. Salvation is completely Christ's work. Faith of the heart makes the Christian free from the slavery of sin, and from the pressure of law's demands. It brings joy and peace to the heart.

3. Traditional Rules and Freedom of Choice

In the jungle of choices, one can drift into the bondage of law. Paul had personal experiences of this. Having studied, as a young man, Stoic philosophy and Jewish Pharisaism, he sought to accurately observe the Jewish law with 248 orders and 365 prohibitions. According to the understanding of that time, there were as many orders as there are members in the human body, and as many prohibitions as there are days in a year. Prohibitions included, among other things, regulations relating to food. Paul believed that by complying with the orders and prohibitions he can fulfill God's law. After receiving the gift of faith, he was released from the slavery of sin into Christian freedom because of the merit work of Christ, who had fulfilled the law. Later some Galatian believers fell back into the slavery of the law and into the life-restricting orders of traditional rules, into the doctrine of works. Paul wrote to them: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:1-3).

In the Epistle to the Corinthians Paul reminded us that in our choices we need to consider other believers. He stated that "All things are lawful for me," but at the same time he reminded that not all things are constructive, beneficial, or necessary (1 Cor. 10:23). With this Paul did not mean permissiveness of sin, but the freedom to eat all meat that was sold. The congregation of Corinth was concerned with eating meat that had been sacrificed to the idols. The leftover meat from sacrificial ceremonies of temples was sold at lower prices, and other meat was not even necessarily available. Paul assured that meat was suitable to eat regardless of why the animal was slaughtered. Although he considered eating meat sacrificed to idols perfectly fine, he himself did not want to eat it lest he would offend someone's conscience. In that case eating sacrificial meat would not have been edifying or constructive. Paul did not want to seek his own benefit, but what was best for others. He stated: "For neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse" (1 Cor. 8:8).

II. Freedom in the Life of a Christian

1. Sin Threatens Freedom

The freedom before God is even more important than outward freedom. The narrative of the Fall into sin clearly shows that going on the way of one's own will always leads into losing this freedom. The actions of Adam and Eve showed that they had lost their inner freedom due to

disobedience. They felt bad and were deathly afraid to face God and the consequences. It is said that sin is a burnable matter that is dangerous to carry on the conscience. It should not be left to burden the conscience. The pride of the heart causes a person to see fault in other person and to think that he or she would have a reason to first humble to repentance. The starting point to take care of matters is childlike humility.

The most important personal relationships are in our home, in our close circle of family members. No individual person can bring peace to the world's crises, but there is always room for a peacekeeper in the home or workplace. The best way to care for personal relationships is to ask forgiveness for one's own words and deeds that have hurt close ones. Gossiping about offences of the third person does not edify anything, but just the opposite, it increases the burden of a bad conscience. A travel friend who is sorrowing aloud over a fall of a close one should be advised to go and speak about the matter to the fallen one himself.

Christian freedom has been purchased with a precious price. Earthly gold, silver, money or man's works were not enough for the payment. On the cross Jesus took upon himself the death that would have belonged to us. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The freedom of the child of God is first and foremost freedom from sin and from the bonds of eternal death, the consequence of sin. Unfortunately, this freedom is too often understood as living in sin. Such freedom is called freedom of the flesh. Therefore, the freedom of the child of God is not freedom to sin but freedom from sin. In his or her life living faith is evident as fruits of the Holy Spirit.

2. By Faith We Are Free from Man's Slavery

The foundation of our salvation is the redemption work of our Savior. Because of His merits we have permission to believe our own sins forgiven. Through faith we have been joined to the throng of believers, the kingdom of God. Its essence is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. In this atmosphere, we feel free to express our opinions and to ask questions when we do not understand all the mysteries of faith. The Heavenly Father opens the understanding in the congregation through the Holy Spirit. It is marvelous to note that sometimes His messenger is a small child or an elder living the evening of his or her life. From them we can hear teachings, advice and even rebuke that is necessary for our life of faith. In the discussion, we may come to realize that too often we tend to make simple matters of salvation complicated and difficult. We do not even always notice how the way to heaven is dimmed.

Among the family of God everyone should be able to feel secure. Sometimes fear prevents secure freedom. All are equal and accepted as they are. A culture of open discussion cannot be taken for granted; we can learn it together. The Son of God frees a person to true freedom. The followers of Christ are free from the power of sin and death. Even with the continuous change of times, customs and cultures, God's people battle against sin with the power of the gospel and ask for the light of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Savior's words in the Sermon on the Mount advise each one of us to always seek in life what is God's will. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness." Our shackles often result from the demands to accept different lifestyles. In our time there seems to be no permission to think according to God's Word when it is contrary to popular opinion. It seems that there is no room to consider matters according to the will of the Heavenly Father concerning, for example,

birth control, divorce or same-sex marriage. People do not want to accept the Biblical doctrine of Christ and its teachings of God's kingdom. It is contradictory that it seems that the demand to accept different understandings and decisions does not apply to those who want to hold to the teachings of the Bible. However, Christ came to free His followers from the slavery of men. This freedom is owning the righteousness of God.

III. Freedom and Responsibility

1. Freedom Calls for Responsibility

Freedom also includes responsibility that arises from God's love. A believer cannot simply be a bystander when one's friend in faith is tiring and drifting towards shipwreck in faith. The living faith instructs one to act. Responsibility for one's neighbor means extending a helping hand and journeying beside him or her. At the same time, it is loving in grace and truth according to the Word and will of the Lord. The Heavenly Father has called us to do this duty. Therefore, there is no need to think too much about the reactions of the person being helped, nor about the situation in which to speak, even though we tend to do so. In approaching a journey friend, the question is not about approaching as a successful adviser but coming beside him or her as a listener and escort. Then, if the person being helped rejects the offer of help, the messenger of Christ can be free. God's time is different from man's time. God's order of creation is that we have been created for each other. In many places, the Bible speaks of the mutual love of God's children. The Heavenly Father has intended that we bear responsibility and care for each other. In God's kingdom, we serve God and our neighbor in the Spirit of love, not in the Spirit of bondage. Care means accepting comprehensive responsibility.

The Christians also need to carry many kinds of personal burdens in their lives. Apostle instructs: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). We also have a responsibility in the work of God's kingdom. It is carried out when sisters and brothers give us duties. We can trust that duties are not given against God's will. The work is His and we can be His helpers.

2. Being Free in Faith One Receives Strength from Grace

Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son is a good example of the freedom and joy offered by the world, and on the other hand, what freedom is in the Father's home. The parable describes how the freedom of a child of God can be lost in two ways: through permissiveness of sin, but also by trusting in one's own wisdom, success and good works. In the parable, the Father's home depicts God's kingdom. The younger son asked for his share of the possessions that belong to him as an heir. Perhaps the son thought that he could enjoy the inheritance of his home more freely somewhere else. The son left home and all the good he had enjoyed there. Outside the home, however, slavery awaited him instead of freedom. The inheritance did not secure his living, but he had to serve others and ended up in the midst of want and filth. *Learning and longing for the Father's home, however, brought about blessing.* The younger brother was enticed by the wide world with its temptations. There were perhaps also unbelieving friends from the world. "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (2 Pet. 2:19).

It is also worth examining the part of the older brother of the prodigal son. He was also a partaker of

the inheritance which the Father divided between His sons. The older brother worked diligently in the fields of his home, but everything was not in order. Someone had robbed the freedom and joy from work and life. The return of his younger brother did not cause a festive mood in him like in his Father who hurried to meet His son and arranged a celebration. Father invited also the older brother to celebrate. His answer showed evidence of a bitter and demanding mind. He felt that he was entitled to better treatment and position because of his own works and merits. The mind of love had disappeared and demands had come in its place. The first of the fruits of the Spirit is love. The greatest gift in a person's life is to receive forgiveness. One should love his neighbor as himself. The slavery of sin, falling under the law threatens there where life is not dependent upon the power of God's grace.

Jesus compared the believers to a flock of sheep. This parable contains extremely deep wisdom. The flock follows its shepherd by traveling near him, for it wants to hear its shepherd's voice. The farther the sheep goes from the shepherd, the more dangerous the journey becomes. Jesus taught in His parable: "And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" (John 10:4,5). People who think or believe differently speak of rules that restrict and govern our life. The parable of the Good Shepherd depicts our life otherwise. The power that keeps the flock together is the secure voice of the Good Shepherd. We desire to hear and follow it, and to seek our way towards it. The closer we can be to that voice, the more secure and free we feel.