

Our service today is a festival service, celebrating the Reformation. While we all have heard about the Reformation, we may be at a little bit of a loss to explain what it is all about. We probably know that it has something to do with Martin Luther, but still we may not understand why we make such a fuss about this day. We do not celebrate this day just as a history lesson. I could spend a great deal of time telling you about the struggles which Martin Luther needed to undergo, and how the Lord helped and guided him through them. But in doing so, if it did not apply to your life, the very heart of this festival would be missing. The Reformation is a historical fact, for it began when Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Castle Church door. But that is not the main reason that we observe this festival — we want the results of the Reformation to remain with us. And those results are what we desire to remember, and treasure, as we again celebrate the Reformation this year. As we celebrate the Reformation, we will take a closer look at what Paul wrote to the Galatians, as he encouraged them, **STAND FIRM IN THE FREEDOM OF CHRIST'S GOSPEL!** That means that 1) we dare not let ourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery, but instead, 2) we will let our faith express itself through love.

This week, you will be using your vote as you seek to stand firm in the freedoms which we have in this great country of ours. We do not want anyone to take away those precious freedoms which are ours. We do not want to let anyone enslave us to their desires and forms of government. In much the same vein, that is what Paul is telling the Galatian Christians. They had heard the precious truth of the gospel as Paul had brought it to them. They had heard of Jesus' great love that caused Him to come to this earth, live a perfect life for all, and then to lay down His life through His death on the cross so that we all could be made free from sin, and heirs of God's eternal kingdom. So Paul wrote: **"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."** (1) All that Jesus did for us brought us true freedom. Now we need to be on our guard so that no one takes this freedom away from us. For the Galatian Christians, a group of people known as the Judaizers told these new believers that even after they came to know Jesus as their Savior, they still needed to obey God's OT laws and regulations for His chosen people. They sought to convince the Galatians that, in order to be saved, they needed to be circumcised, to worship on the sabbath day, to observe all of the OT festivals, and so on in addition to believing in Jesus.

In Martin Luther's day, the church also was teaching the people that they needed to do more than just believe in Jesus. Luther had been taught that he had to make confession of his sins to the priest for them to be forgiven, then he had to do penance for his sins. If that were not enough, certain acts, like becoming a monk, would ensure his salvation. All of this was in addition to believing in Jesus.

Even today, there are many times when Christians are told that they have to act in a certain way to be pleasing to their Father in heaven, such as not being able to smoke, or drink, or play cards, and so on. Others say that Christians have to go to church, read their Bibles, and bring their offerings. When discussing the certainty of going to heaven, even "good" Lutherans have told me that they know that they will be heaven because they have been life-long members, went to Sunday School, were confirmed and married in the church. So today, even we are being attacked with the same types of ideas faced by the Galatian Christians and Luther.

Paul lays it out very clearly for everyone to understand — It is for freedom that Christ has set us free, and we are not to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. That yoke of slavery is to be bound again by the demands of the law. Paul makes it very clear that anyone who thinks that he must obey any part of the law in order to get to heaven is obligated to obey the whole law. We cannot pick and choose which of God's commands we must keep in order to earn our way to heaven. If we are told that we must go to church and bring our offerings in order to be saved, then we are obligated to keep every one of God's commands in order to get to heaven. And we all know that this is impossible.

That is why Paul states it so strongly: **"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."** (4) As soon as anyone seeks to help gain eternal life

by doing some actions of the law, then he is no longer accepting it as a free gift from God's love. In this life we are well aware of the fact that we do not get anything for nothing. There is always a catch, some hidden fee, some way that the company is going to make money off of us. So we also begin to expect God to tell us that there is some hidden charge, some duty or obligation that we have to fulfill in order to gain eternal life. So when we are told that we have to go to church or bring an offering, we figure that this is the hidden catch. But Paul makes it very plain that if we begin to think that way, that we have to do something to help with our salvation or to complete it, then we have already fallen away from grace — we are no longer believing that we are saved by grace alone.

And that is exactly what the Reformation is all about. Martin Luther came to understand that our salvation is a free gift of God's love, and that we must stand firm in the freedom of Christ's gospel. Paul taught this very clearly in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatian Christians. We dare not think that we can add anything to the wonderful gift presented to us through faith in Jesus. **“By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.”** (5) Instead of us seeking to be righteous in God's sight because of what we do, we are look to the righteousness which Jesus has won for us and offers freely to us. It is insulting to Jesus to say that we have to pay for the gift offered to us. How would you feel if, at Christmas, after receiving a gift from you, someone offered to pay you for it? That is exactly what many try to do with the free gift of forgiveness which Jesus offers to us.

Luther, as he studied the Bible, came to understand the true freedom which is offered to all people in the gospel. Jesus has done everything necessary for each one of us to inherit eternal life. It is a done deal, received by us when the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. As we receive this gift of salvation through faith in Jesus, we do receive all the righteousness which Jesus has won for us. We are truly free from all of the demands of the law, for Jesus lived on this earth to fulfill the law perfectly for us. His perfect obedience is credited to our account. Therefore God will never condemn us, for when He sees us, He sees the perfection Jesus has given to us.

We are now to stand firm in this freedom which Jesus gives to us. And that is the message of the Reformation. We are saved by grace alone, receiving the precious gift which Jesus has won for us. We cannot, and dare not, seek to add to this gift by the works which we do.

But at the same time, we need to remember that even though we are not saved by any deed which we may do, still that does not mean that we are now to sit back and do nothing. Paul also writes, **“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”** (6) Having been given such a wonderful gift as the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation of our souls, we will have this great desire to show our gratitude to our heavenly Father. So even though we will zealously guard our freedom from the demands of the law as a way of gaining eternal life, we will still seek to let the light of faith within us shine forth through the actions which we do.

We have been set free through faith to do those things which God wants us to be doing. We are not under any obligation or threat of punishment, but now those actions will flow forth as evidences of the love within our hearts. So we do not have to go to church, but we will want to go church. We do not have to give up using foul language, but we will want to avoid using such words. We will not have to bring an offering, but we will want to return a thank offering to the Lord for all the blessings He has showered upon us.

So on this Reformation Sunday, let us remember that we are to stand firm in the freedom of Christ's gospel. We will not allow ourselves to be burdened again under the yoke of slavery to the duties of the law. The Lord had used Martin Luther to restore this precious truth to His church. As heirs of the Reformation, we need to keep reminding ourselves of this wonderful truth, for there are many who seek to take this away from us. So we do rejoice that the Lord has preserved this precious truth of the gospel to us even today. Then, as we treasure the salvation offered to us freely through faith, we will let our faith and love in return shine forth as we express our gratitude in the actions we do.