

**+ Galatians 5:1-6 + The Story of Real Freedom +
+ 1st Sunday of End Time: Reformation Sunday + 26 October 2014 +**

I've never been one for scary stories. You know what I'm talking about—those stories that might give you or your children a “bad dream” at night, stories that cause a chill to go down your spine or the hair on the back of your neck to stand up. I have to admit that I've never been a fan of those kinds of stories. I prefer adventures or dramas or comedies and certainly happy endings. I've never been a fan of being terrified, yet many people do. After all, scary movies and haunted houses make millions every year.

...But it's Reformation Sunday—the Sunday when we give thanks for God's grace in restoring the true teaching of his Word to his Church through his servant Martin Luther. Why are we talking about scary stories? It has nothing to do with Halloween being the same day as the day when the Reformation started. No, it's because of what the Apostle Paul has to tell us in his letter to the Galatian Christians. Now I doubt that you felt a chill go down your spine or the hair stand up on the back of your neck as you were listening to Paul's words in the Second Lesson, but the story he tells is frightening because he warns us away from an eternally horrifying end.

Everything starts out so well, so beautifully. ***“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”*** This isn't just any kind of freedom that we get to enjoy, but freedom from slavery to guilt, to the burden of God's holy, impossible Law, to the cravings of your sinful nature. ***“Christ has set us free.”*** Before, you were a slave. You were a prisoner, but now you are free. You have been set free from sin and guilt and unbelief by Jesus himself.

So now you have freedom—freedom from the burden of God's holy Law, but also freedom to serve the Lord in such a way that your relationship with God does not depend on how perfectly you obey his righteous will. That freedom is a beautiful, life-changing gift from God through Christ Jesus, but just as we're about to take that freedom out for the first time, the Apostle gives us a dire warning, ***“Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”***

“Burdened again”? “A yoke of slavery”? Seriously, Paul? With all due respect, there's no way you or I are going to let that happen again...right? There's no way we'd ever fall into that trap again...would we? It's very tempting to think as Christians, there's no way we could fall into that trap of possibly letting ourselves ***“be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”***. There's a certain pride in thinking that because we have God's Word in its truth and purity or because we happen to belong to a true-teaching church, there's no possible way that we could fall back into the old slavery of sin or guilt or self-righteousness. Yet Paul warns us, ***“Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”***

You and I need that warning because every one of us needs to be reminded of who we once were and who your sinful nature continues to be. It's a terrifyingly ugly picture. You see, at one time you and I were spiritual zombies. Before the holy God, we were nothing more than walking dead in our transgressions and sin and guilt. By nature, we were hostile to the holy God and his ways and will. We wanted nothing more than to oppose him and destroy him. By nature, we were solely focused on gratifying the cravings of our sinful flesh with no regard for anyone other than ourselves.

We deserved to be slaves. We deserved to be crushed and oppressed and condemned with eternal death in hell. We were ugly and awful and disgusting, but ***“Christ set us free.”*** By his perfect life, he gave you life. He replaced your dead heart of stone with a living heart of flesh. He restored you to real life here and has given you eternal life in heaven someday. By his innocent death on the cross, Jesus reconciled you to God—taking God's mortal enemy and transforming you through the water and Word of Holy Baptism into his beloved child. Through his Word, Jesus changed your heart and mind and will to focus not on gratifying that zombie of a sinful nature inside you, but on gladly and freely obeying his holy will.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” You can see why Paul would warn you and me with every fiber of his being to not go back to what we once were. With Jesus you have freedom. Apart from him you are a slave. With Jesus you have life. Apart from him you have death. With Jesus you have reconciliation with God. Apart from him you have burning hostility. With Jesus you have everything, because Jesus did everything for you.

Yet like a typical horror movie, our sinful natures lead us down the path towards the danger rather than away from it. Your natural instincts tell you that even though Jesus did so much, there's got to be something left for you to do. So you run away from your Rescuer and head back towards the danger. That was a big problem for the Galatian Christians. There were some among them who were absolutely convinced that even though Jesus did so much, they still had to follow the old ceremonial law. So they tried to convince their fellow believers of

the same. That meant the men would have to be circumcised. Only kosher food could be eaten and the old Sabbaths and festivals and ceremonies had to be followed. They claimed if you did all that and followed Jesus, well, then you'd truly be free of danger!

There's a big problem with that kind of thinking. If you head down that path, then you completely abandon the One who came to save you. Paul practically shouts his warning, **"Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all."** You want to tell Jesus that he didn't do enough to save you? Then you might as well kiss his help goodbye because if you have to do something for your salvation, then all that Jesus did doesn't matter.

Paul's story gets more terrifying. **"Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law."** When you depend on your own help, not only do you reject the complete help the Savior gives you, but it also traps you right back where you were before. If you think you can possibly do anything to contribute to your salvation or if you fool yourself into thinking that God has to accept you as a good person, then you will find yourself right back in the dungeon, right back in the impossibly heavy chains of God's holy Law. You see, if you're going to depend on yourself for help and rescue from the slavery and condemnation of sin, then you should expect to do everything in God's holy Law in every thought, every word, every action, and you can't slip up ever. That's terrifying because it's impossible and it always ends in eternal death.

If Paul's warnings weren't scary enough, he has one more for us. **"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."** Can anything be more terrifying? This isn't fiction that Paul describes for us. It's reality. It's fact. You can't leave the theater or turn the TV off here. If you try to depend on yourself for your salvation, even in the slightest, you will lose everything. You will lose your Savior, and you will be separated from his saving love for all eternity. There is nothing that should terrify us more than that possibility for us and others.

So how can we possibly be saved? How can sinners like us possibly be declared righteous in God's sight? How can we possibly get past the ugliness and terror of what Paul has told us? As terrifying as his warnings might be, you need to realize this isn't a horror story. No, it's a story of freedom—real freedom for you and me by grace through faith in Christ alone. Remember what Paul said earlier. **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."** Now he explains what he meant. **"But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value."**

The story of your freedom is not a horror story ending with the terrors of hell separating you from God's love forever, but instead your story actually has a happy ending. It has everything to do with grace and faith and Jesus. How are you declared not guilty? How are you set free from sin and guilt and the slavery of the Law? You are set free not by your choice or your efforts, but by the work of the Holy Spirit creating and strengthening faith in Christ in your heart through the Word of God, through Holy Baptism and the Holy Supper. Your **"righteousness"** before God comes solely through your Savior Jesus Christ—the One who came to this scary world to rescue you purely because of his own merciful love that moved him to sacrifice himself for you.

When you're in Christ, you can't force God to forgive you by what you do or leave undone. You can't put your trust in your "churchiness" or your rejection of church. Neither has any value before the holy God. Instead God forgives, justifies, and rescues you and me only because of and through what Jesus did for us. Christ's perfect life, Christ's innocent suffering and death, Christ's resurrection from the dead rescues us from a horrific eternity. **"Christ has set us free"**—and that changes everything in your life and mine.

In Christ, you are set free. Now **"the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."** What Christ Jesus has done is now yours through faith in him—that God-given, childlike trust that simply receives his gifts. In Christ, then, that faith shows itself in action. As a professor of mine once wrote, **"Selfless, giving love is the channel through which the Christian's faith is constantly and eagerly expressing itself. Love flows from faith, not the other way around."**¹

¹ Daniel P. Leyrer. "Exegetical Brief: Galatians 5:6—Reformation Battle Cry: Faith Works". *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 111:4 (Fall 2014). ed. John Brug. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2014. 278.

In the freedom that Christ can only give, faith is constantly growing through the study and hearing of God's Word. Faith in Christ constantly seeks ways to serve the Lord out of loving thankfulness for what he has accomplished—and that loving thankfulness shows itself in loving service to your neighbor, to your family, to your friends, to your co-workers, classmates, and others.

Without faith in Christ, there is no love behind those actions, only selfish reasons. In Christ, however, you are free from those selfish motives. By faith alone in Jesus, you receive his gifts of grace and now put that love into action for others. ***“Christ has set us free.”*** In the end, that's no horror story. Instead it's the story of real freedom which is yours by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. May we ever cherish that real freedom in Christ with faith that expresses itself through love. Amen.