

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free” (Galatians 5:9)

June 27, 2010

Fifteen years ago one of my all time favorite movies was released, *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson’s brilliant portrayal of William Wallace, the Scottish leader who led the Scots against the English. At the end of the film Wallace is betrayed and captured, imprisoned, tortured, and executed. In one of the last scenes of the movie, Wallace cries out the final word of his life, “Freedom!” Wallace died for freedom.

Today I’m preaching again from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Today’s passage begins with what many scholars consider the key verse of the entire letter, Galatians 5:1 in which Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Christian freedom is the main theme of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Christ died to set us free. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are set free from the curse of the law, set free from the bondage of sin, and set free from the fear of death. “For freedom Christ has set us free.”

At the risk of oversimplification there tend to be two basic approaches to the Christian life: Law-Gospel-Law and Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit. Law-Gospel-Law does *not* equal freedom. Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit does.

Both begin with the Law, the standards of God for our lives as set forth in Scripture, particularly the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments have to do specifically with our relationship with God, and forbid our having other gods before God, making idols, taking God’s name in vain, and command us to keep the Sabbath holy. The last six commandments have to do with how we treat other people, and command us to honor our parents, and *not* to murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet. The Old Testament is very clear that we will be blessed if we keep these commandments, and cursed if we don’t, and if we’re honest we see the truth of that in our life experience.

Jesus took the Ten Commandments very seriously. In fact, in the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this crystal clear, as he preached: “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets (a summary phrase referring to the entire Old Testament); I have come not to abolish but to

fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter... will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

And Jesus did not stop there. He went past the outward observance of the law and straight to the attitudes of the heart. Regarding murder Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). Regarding adultery Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:27-28). So according to Scripture, when it comes to the Law of God, we are required not only to observe it *outwardly* in our actions (or lack thereof) but also *inwardly* in our hearts.

The reality, of course, is that all of us have been and continue to be in one way or another guilty before God of breaking his laws. Most of us have broken every one of the Ten Commandments either outwardly or inwardly and are guilty before God. We are condemned, without excuse, without appeal to Dr. Phil, without any recourse, without any way out. That’s the Law.

But then, thankfully, we have the Gospel. In his grace and mercy God has given us a way out, Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In his death on the cross for us Jesus Christ did exactly what he said he came to do with reference to the law; he fulfilled it, absolutely and entirely. Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was perfect, who never sinned (Hebrews 4:15), whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), not only took upon himself the punishment due us because we have all broken the Law of God, but also fulfilled the law in our place, and in doing so gives us the gift of righteousness before God through faith in him. Jesus is our substitute in taking the punishment due us and Jesus is our substitute in fulfilling the law for us. Paul calls it justification by faith (Galatians 2:16). The gift of righteousness, with the accompanying hope of eternal life, is nothing we can earn; it is a free gift from our gracious God. That’s the Gospel.

Now comes the difference. In Law-Gospel-Law after receiving God’s gift of forgiveness and righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ we then go back to the

Law—we devise a whole set of laws and expectations by which we must live. In Paul's day Law-Gospel-Law meant that you still had to be circumcised and that you still had to obsess about keeping the Old Testament law.

Law-Gospel-Law today looks like this: if you really are a Christian, you had better demonstrate your commitment, you had better attend church each and every week, you had better have a quiet time each and every day, you had better tithe, you had better be part of a small group not just for a year or two but for the rest of your life, you had better have an accountability partner.

Law-Gospel-Law today means that if you really are a Christian, you need to live a purpose-driven life, you need to keep the seven promises of a promise keeper, you need to fill your life with spiritual disciplines, you need to live your best life now. Law-Gospel-Law means that you need to have a spiritual director because the Holy Spirit isn't enough. Law-Gospel-Law means that at the end of the day the Gospel isn't enough, that we need to try to supplement what Jesus already accomplished on the cross. Law-Gospel-Law means that we are once again trying to earn the favor of God.

The ultimate result of the Law-Gospel-Law approach to Christianity tends to be 3-D: discouragement, disillusionment and despair, because Christians are rarely as committed as they think they should be (and if they are, they may need to be literally committed ☺). Most Christians I know don't attend church each and every week, don't have a quiet time each and every day, don't tithe, aren't part of a small group, do not have an accountability partner. Most Christians I know are not purpose-driven, but are trying not to be driven crazy. Most Christians I know have broken promises they have made, have failed in one way or another with spiritual disciplines, hope that the life they're living now is not their best life. Most Christians I know are sinners in need of grace. I know I am. Perhaps you are too.

Now please hear me out. I think it is very important to read Scripture and pray, to give generously financially, to have meaningful relationships with other Christians, and to have conversations with older and wiser Christians in order to learn from them—I do all those things and they have been and are very helpful for my life. But we can do these things from the starting point of freedom, not the law, we do

these things not in an attempt to earn God's favor, but in grateful response to him for the favor he has already given us in Jesus Christ.

John Stott, an Anglican clergyman and scholar, describes the significance of this in his book, *The Message of Galatians*:

“The Christian freedom (Paul) describes is... freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with a view to winning the favor of God... Our Christian life began not with our decision to follow Christ but with God's call to us to do so. He took the initiative in His grace while we were still in rebellion and sin... he came to us and called us to freedom” (p. 132 and 137).

The danger with Law-Gospel-Law is that people respond to the Gospel with faith and excitement, and in their zeal embrace all these things and end up not measuring up, end up seeing themselves and others in the church as hypocrites, end up discouraged and disillusioned, then end up writing off the whole experience as a religious or spiritual phase and surrender to despair. Law-Gospel-Law reduces our walk with God to a to-do list of spiritual activities that leave us feeling either discouraged or self-righteous, neither of which glorify God. Law-Gospel-Law appeals to our perceived need to control, rather than our real need to trust God.

But the good news is that when it comes to our Christian life, Scripture does not point us to Law-Gospel-Law, but to Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit.

As Christians we have been filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who allows us to say, “Jesus is Lord” in the first place (I Corinthians 12:3). It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that God is our Heavenly Father and that we are his children (Romans 8:15-16). It is the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth and who reminds us of the teachings of Jesus (John 14:16-17; 26). It is the Holy Spirit who convicts our hearts of our breaking the law of God, and it is the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to the truth of the Gospel.

And the good news is that the work of the Holy Spirit does not end there. In today's passage we see what Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit looks like. Paul writes, “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh... if you are led

by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law... the fruit of the Spirit is love... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit is freedom, the freedom of life in Christ, the freedom of being a new creation in Christ Jesus, as Bono sings in the U2 song, *Miracle Drug*, “Freedom has a scent like the top of a newborn baby’s head.”

However, this does not mean that as Christians we can live lives of sin and excess because, hey, God loves us anyhow, as Paul writes, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence... do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit means that when it comes to dealing with the temptations in our lives, instead of simply giving in on the one hand or setting up a legalistic accountability system on the other, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us and lead us. The Holy Spirit will never lead us to commit the various sins, or “works of the flesh” Paul lists in today’s passage: fornication, jealousy, anger, dissensions, envy, drunkenness, etc. The Holy Spirit will never lead us to do anything that is contrary to the Law of God in Scripture because the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture in the first place. Gratifying the desires of the flesh never leads to freedom, but the Holy Spirit does. In fact, as Paul wrote elsewhere, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (II Corinthians 3:17).

But freedom in Christ goes way past the Holy Spirit not leading us to do things contrary to God’s law. The Holy Spirit also bears fruit in our lives, primarily the fruit of love, and love in fact fulfills the law. In today’s passage, Paul writes, “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14), and elsewhere Paul writes, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10). And of course, Jesus himself said that loving God and loving others is the summary of the entire law of God (Matthew 22:37-40).

This love for God and others is not something we conjure up in our own strength; it is the fruit of the spirit, as Paul writes, “the fruit of the Spirit is love...” (5:22). This fruit of love that the Holy Spirit bears in us is agape love, self-sacrificial love, love that is focused on the other person, love that doesn’t change. Last week I read one of my favorite Shakespeare plays, *Henry V*. After the English had defeated the French at Agincourt the English King Henry V tries to woo the French princess Katherine, and describes the kind of heart that gives real love:

“A good leg will fall; a straight back will stoop; a black beard will turn white; a curled pate will grow bald; a fair face will wither; a full eye will wax hollow; but a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon; or, rather, the sun, and not the moon,--for it shines bright, and never changes, but keeps his course truly” (Act V, scene 2).

That’s the kind of love God gives us in Christ, love like the sun that “never changes, but keeps his course truly.”

The problem is we don’t keep our course truly. The problem is that even as Christians we are sinners, that at times we gratify our sinful desires and love neither God nor others. How do we handle that? “Live by the Spirit,” Paul writes, “be guided by the Spirit.” There is a very simple prayer that I have prayed often: “Lord, please cleanse me from my sin and lead me by your Spirit... cleanse me from my sin and lead me by your Spirit.” I pray that when I’m on my way to do a pastoral visit and someone cuts me off in traffic and I act, well, not very Christ-like. I pray that when I find myself facing a challenging situation in which I need wisdom, and need it fast, when I find myself facing temptation, when I need help loving people that I would rather not. Often when we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, we get an impression in our heart or a different perspective that could have only come from him, and that can make all the difference.

Back to *Braveheart* for a moment. When I first saw *Braveheart* I wanted to identify with William Wallace. I still do. The reality is, however, that I can identify more with Robert the Bruce, who once fought with Wallace only to betray him, and his betrayal led directly to his death. But that’s not how the story ended. Robert the Bruce got a second chance, and later rode into battle against the English and led the Scots in their fight for freedom.

The Law shows us that all of us, like Robert the Bruce, betrayed God, our Creator, through our sin. But the good news is that is not how the story ended. The Gospel shows us that God gave us a second chance and graciously sent his only Son, Jesus Christ to die in our place, to take our punishment upon himself, to fulfill the law in our place. The Holy Spirit shows us that Christ died for our freedom, not freedom to gratify our sinful desires, but freedom to love. Law-Gospel-Holy Spirit means freedom, freedom for which Christ died: “For freedom Christ has set us free.”

Amen.