

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Galatians 4:1-7

1 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

St. Paul starts our lesson today by explaining what he meant by what came before it. So what was that? He spent chapter three proving that we are justified, that is, declared innocent in God's sight, not by works, but through faith. While the law is necessary, curbing sin with its threats and exposing our sins so that we will see our need for a Savior, the law cannot save. ***"The righteous shall live by faith,"*** Paul reminds us, and faith is something the law cannot create. Only God's love and His Spirit can do that work.

Now St. Paul uses an earthly illustration to make his point, the case of the son of a wealthy father too young yet to receive his inheritance. Like children in our own day, such a child was schooled to prepare him for his future. In this case, he was placed under a tutor, usually a servant, who oversaw his education and development. So long as he remained a child, that young boy, even though he was slated to inherit his father's status and influence some day, was in essence no better than a servant. In fact, he was under a servant, to prepare him for the day he would be free, when he would receive his inheritance.

3 In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

In the Middle Ages, schools weren't like they are today. Teachers were not only given freedom to give their students a good licking now and again, but were actually expected to do so regularly. In fact, in some cities, teachers were required to demonstrate their ability to administer corporal punishment for the community from time to time, to ensure them that they were getting their money's worth in their investment in the school. When a student couldn't decline a verb or remember part of a memory verse, he wasn't encouraged to try harder next time. No, he was beaten or shamed, or beaten and shamed. Thus, we have the dunce cap, for instance. And while we obviously might take issue with the methods employed by those communities and teachers, their end goal was actually good and helped bring us out of the Dark Ages. They wanted the students to learn, and whether or not they learned for the right reasons or out of fear, learn most of them did, even begrudgingly and kicking and screaming.

The law is like a Medieval classroom in many ways. It bruises our consciences and shames us when we sin, when we contradict the law of nature or of God, both to restrain evildoing and keep good order in society and also to show us our need for grace. And, while we might not like its methods, like the teachers of the Middle Ages, its end goal is good: the salvation of sinners. The only problem is, while the law can bring us to the point where we recognize our need for salvation, where we see how far we've fallen short of God's glory, and often, of even basic human common sense and dignity, it cannot give salvation. That is where the gospel must come into play, the gift of God's Son.

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Remember, first of all, that God uses sons here because the sons received the inheritance in Paul's day. Although the picture is that of a son, the truth expressed includes both Christian men and women.

The law can make a servant, but only the gospel can make a son, and so when the time had fully come, at just the right time, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to set us free from the law. No, that doesn't mean the gospel is an excuse for sin. That it is not. The gospel does not do away with one jot or tittle of the law. What it does mean is that the gospel and the gospel alone, embraced through faith, enables us to render God obedience, not by compulsion—kicking and screaming and begrudgingly, whether on account of threats or for fear of shame—but rather out of love, as a son and not a slave. Christ became subject to the law, keeping it perfectly, and even receiving the punishment the law rightly declared we deserved but wrongly placed upon him, in order to strip the law of its ability to now condemn us who stand in faith, who have been adopted as His Father's sons.

The gospel, in essence, turns the law from our enemy into our friend, from a harsh taskmaster to our delight, as the psalmist says, as it becomes, not a “have to” but a “get to,” a means to glorify our God and do good to our neighbor, as we see in it, not a burden, but beneficial guidance. The law still cannot save, and the believer will not keep the law to be saved, but obedience to the law is a fruit of salvation. As sons of God, as heirs, we cannot help but begin to resemble Him in our daily lives as we are renewed in His image.

Perhaps one of the best examples of law obedience versus Gospel obedience is the story of Cain and Abel. Cain gave his sacrifice in the hope of a reward and in an attempt to outdo his brother. Abel gave his sacrifice out of love for God and wasn't worried about comparing himself to others when it came to such things, because he knew that righteousness is a gift and not bragging rights. In Cain's case, the law could only work wrath, and just as we all too often do when called on our sin or rightly criticized, Cain reacted not with the humility of faith, but in anger, and slew his brother. He hadn't, like his brother, come to understand the gospel. He was too caught up in the point keeping of law obedience to know the peace of sins forgiven, which was precisely why the Lord had warned Him earlier, ***“Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”***

Christians still sin, but they struggle with it. Cain wasn't struggling. He was consumed with it, and thus his sin was his downfall. There is a stark warning in that for us as well. When we have ceased struggling with sin but have given into it and ourselves over to it, we must ask ourselves if we haven't crucified our faith instead of being crucified with Christ through faith, and repentance is the only proper response.

***6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”
7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.***

As God's sons through faith, we are now also the Spirit's temples. The Spirit who works faith in God's Son has taken up residence in our hearts. And it's important as Christians that we never allow this truth to become only theoretical or speculative. The Spirit actually and really does dwell in our hearts. This is both a reason to live lives worthy of this holy Resident within us but also a great comfort, for even when we can't arrange the words to pray in hard times, and even before we say a word to God about our needs, the Spirit of the Son is active, with sighs and groans heaven can't ignore, crying out, ***“Abba, Father.”***

Summary

Both law and gospel are necessary. I must recognize my sin to recognize the need for a Savior from it. Good works are necessary, but not for salvation. We are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone. We are saved by faith alone, but faith without works is dead. For the Christian, good works are like breathing. What faith breathes in, the love of God, good works breathe out in new obedience. Unlike the labored and deliberate and painful breathing of those dying under the law, this new breathing of faith is spontaneous and joyful. Yes, as sinner-saints on this side of heaven, we are still a bit asthmatic, and can have our attacks of rough breathing, but the Spirit dwelling in us is there to help in just such times, not a ventilator, but an inhaler or nebulizer of sorts, the breath of God to teach us to breathe again naturally through the Word that first brought this Spirit of the Son to us.

The law tells me what to do and not do. The gospel tells me what Christ has done for me. The law humbles, only the gospel can teach humility. While the law commands love, only the gospel can produce it. While the law can most certainly work doubt, only the gospel can work faith. Only the gospel can, because the gospel introduces me to and envelops me in Christ.

If you feel even the faintest love for your heavenly Father, for His Word, for His Son, be thankful and rejoice. That's the Spirit's work. God is at work. He is given you the gift that keeps receiving: faith. Could that faith be stronger? Sure. That's why we are here. But faith is a marvelous wonder no matter how faintly it flickers at times. Keep your hold on Christ, and be sure that He who has begun this good work in you will bring it to completion. And when you stumble, and when the law again rightly does its work, bruising your conscience and bringing your shame, remember where to turn again, to your heavenly Father through Mary's Son and His, not in terror like a slave, but for compassion like a son. Amen.

