

## FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

### Galatians 5:1-6

*It doesn't get easier as you do it, but it sure gets worse if you don't.*

I was in the gym pumping iron, sculpting law and gospel as I like to call these guns, when an older guy said, “You know, it doesn't get easier as you do it, but it sure gets worse if you don't.” He was talking about working out, but when I overheard him say that, I thought of the lessons for this week, as Jesus, Daniel, and St. Paul say the same to us about the Christian life. “It doesn't get easier as you do it, but it sure gets worse if you don't.”

Wherever the gospel is preached, the gospel is opposed, whether openly from without or deceptively from within. In St. Paul's case, the latter was the problem in Galatia. Some false prophets had followed him and, after he left, added conditions to the gospel. These false teachers told the Galatians that Paul was great and all, and the gospel was great and all, but there was just one important thing that had been left out: circumcision was necessary for salvation. They did not simply preach what Christ had done to save the Galatians, but added, “All you have to be saved is be circumcised.” How abominable “All you have to do” is in the ears of St. Paul and of our Lord!

“All you have to do to be saved is...say this prayer...avoid this food...give this gift...go to this place...wear the right clothes...listen to the right music...be a good person...or anything else.” Worst of all, perhaps you've heard, “All you have to do to be saved is believe.” Few realize “All you have to do to be saved is believe” is not the gospel. It is the law. It seeks to somehow move you to create in yourself what God alone can create: faith. And any attempt to create or foster what God alone can create and foster will lead to either self-righteousness or despair. You are not saved because you believe. You are saved because Jesus died for your sins and rose from the grave for your eternal life. You are not saved because you believe. You are saved because God has worked faith in your unbelieving skull and hardened heart through Baptism and the Word. You are not saved if you believe. You are saved; believe it.

The false teachers in Galatia wanted to duke it out in the ring of the law, with Jesus help of course, but in the ring of the law nonetheless. They wanted to take on Moses, to stand up against God's holy law and win. The problem is, as St. Paul reminds them, that once you step in the ring, you can't pick and choose what kind of punches Moses gets to throw. Rather you must take every punch, you must be accountable for every thought, word, and action.

Giving up things for Lent is not wrong. It can be beneficial, depending on the intention and motive behind it. In my case, when I was a Roman Catholic teen working at Burger King, I, like every good Roman Catholic, gave up meat on Fridays in Lent. Surely, God now loved me now. Maybe I had cussed, lied, stolen, and been angry with my neighbor that Friday, but, voila, I was not eating meat. Being a rounder version of myself at that time, I ate four fish sandwiches instead, and, as the tartar sauce dripped down my face, I could rejoice in my salvation. The Psalmist says, “the judgments of the Lord are sweeter than honey” (19:10), but somehow I don't think this was what he meant. Isaiah's words seem more apropos, “Woe to those who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (5:20). The sweet taste of thinking I had helped my cause with God by the superficial observance of a man-made law that God had not commanded should have been washed away by the bitter knowledge of the fact that I had broken God's actual commands at many times and in many ways.

*“I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have*

*fallen away from grace.*” Do you think you have somehow made peace with God in spite of the sin that entangles you by showing up today? Do you think that you will somehow fool God into thinking you are his friend by coming up to His altar and receiving His Supper to your own impenitent judgment before you return home to your sin, to your living arrangements, to whatever has taken you captive? No, if you are pinning your hopes on that, you are no different from that fat kid with the tartar sauce face, thinking that heaven had just sprung from a deep fryer. If you want to be saved by something you have done, it is too late, for you are already severed from Christ, for while you may have justified yourself here for a brief time in the eyes of men, God and His eternal eyes have hardly been fooled.

We are not saved by the law. **We are saved by Christ through the gospel.** We are damned by the law. **We are pardoned by God through the gospel.** Will you go up against Moses and take every punch, or will you stand behind Christ, who on your behalf took Moses’ every punch and lived? **Will you trust in God or in yourself?** Christ has done it all or He hasn’t done enough. **Christ has done it all, so don’t make that count for nothing by trying to add to Christ’s once for all sacrifice for your salvation.** Christ has done it all, so that now, rather than slaving away for your salvation, you may, as one already saved, freely live for Him.

At the time of the Reformation, Luther despaired of himself, of his fasts, pilgrimages, Masses, and man-made devices, and trusted in Christ alone. **He stood before governors and kings, as Christ promised His followers would, and testified to his one and only hope for righteousness and peace with God: Christ and Him crucified.** He acknowledged before men the One who by grace would acknowledge him before the Father. **Daniel did the same and stepped into the Lion’s den, preferring prayer with God to life without Him.** God delivered Him and the pagan king was moved to praise the LORD. The apostles, Jesus says, would also have to despair of themselves and trust in the Father to give them strength and the Spirit to give them words to speak before governors and kings. It was to be enough for them to know that Christ stood with them and they with Christ. **Christ says, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”** Christ had connected Himself to them for all eternity through the gospel and, in their connectedness to Him, they were saved. **Only by severing themselves from Him through sin and unbelief could they be lost.** As baptized brothers and sisters of our Lord, the same is true for you. **Connected to Him through the gospel, you are saved.** Stay connected to Him, and flee from all that would sever you.

After defending the gospel with all his might, St. Paul closes our lesson with these words: **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”** The Christian life does not end with the gospel, but rather our faith in the gospel demonstrates its life through love. It isn’t easy, but the things that matter most seldom are. **And you aren’t alone; it wasn’t easy for Luther, Daniel, or the apostles either.** It isn’t easy, but Christ has done the hardest part, taking Moses’ every punch in your place. **Faith now celebrates that in our lives, even when celebrating doesn’t seem so fun.** Is some sin severing you from Christ? **Today Christ has severed you from your sin.** Stay connected to Him and sever yourself from whatever would attempt to entangle you to drag you out of Christ’s arms and into the belly of hell. **You have been saved through faith.** Now live that faith. **No, “it doesn’t get easier as you do it, but it sure gets worse if you don’t.”** Amen.