

June 23, 2013
Pentecost 5

“Going Back to the Law or Staying with Christ”

GALATIANS 3:23-29

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. ²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

It is called “The Stockholm Syndrome.” People who are kidnapped and mistreated develop a deep affinity and closeness to their tormentors. That is what happened to Patty Hearst in the 1970’s. She was kidnapped by a group known as the SLA or Symbionse Liberation Army. She became dependent on her captors. They even filmed her holding a gun, denouncing her parents and speaking out against our country.

Even stranger than the Stockholm Syndrome is what we might call “The Law Syndrome.” The ultimate terrorist Satan captures the minds and hearts of people who confess their faith in Christ alone as the source of their salvation. He takes them back to that terribly place of slavery where they trust the law for their salvation. That is what happened to the dear Christians Paul knew in Galatia. He pleads with them to not go back to trusting in themselves and their keeping of the law. He pleads with them to stay with the freedom they have in Christ. Nothing is more important for your life and mine than staying with Christ and not going back to the law.

Life under the law

Paul reminds us that we were once prisoners under the law. “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.” The word for “locked up” is also used in Luke 5 to describe how a net held a large number of fish that Jesus brought into the net. See how the fish struggle to get out of the net. They are captured, then cleaned and then eaten.

Paul gives us a before and after picture. He says that we were once living in a prison being tormented by the law. Paul once lived his life under the law. He describes himself in Philippians 3 as putting confidence in the flesh. He lived each day with the false hope that if just did a little better he would earn God’s love and favor. The Muslims live ever day with “kismet” the hope that Allah will be gracious and merciful if they live their lives according to the laws of Islam. Martin Luther knew what it was like to live each day imprisoned and tortured by the law. He writes in the great hymn, “Dear Christians One and All Rejoice” “Yea, deeper and deeper still I fell life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.”

Years ago an elderly man was walking in the park. He noticed a scruffy, mean looking boy, about twelve years old, with a rusty bird cage. Inside was a sparrow flying around and trying to get out of the cage. The boy was poking the poor bird with a stick and tormenting it. The man asked the boy what he was going to do with the bird. With a voice that exuded mean, he said, "I am going to poke this bird with this stick and then take it home and feed it to my cat." The man asked how much he wanted for the bird and the rusty old cage. The boy's eyes flashed with greed as he said, "Ten dollars and not a penny less." The man pulled out a ten dollar bill and took the cage. He opened the door and the bird flew free. How strange it would be if the bird decided to go back into the cage and be tortured by the mean boy.

Satan's ultimate goal in your life and mine is to take us back into the cage of the law. He wants to torment us with the thoughts that we are not good enough for God's love. Last year in our Star Bible Camp we learned a little song that said, "Living, loving, dying, rising Jesus did it all for me." Satan loves to change that song to "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did his part and I have to do my part."

The only thing the law can do is show us where we have failed to live up to what God expects of us. A mirror can show you a blemish on your face, but it cannot remove the blemish. The law shows us our sin, but it cannot be used to remove the punishment of sin. Only Jesus can do this for us. Paul compares this purpose of the law to the function of the tutor or guardian who disciplined the students in wealthy Greek families. "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." The word here for put in charge is actually a noun rather than a verb. It is the word "paidagogos." This person, usually a slave, had the job of taking the boys to school and making sure they learned their lessons. This slave was given the responsibility of disciplining the boys and showing them where they had done wrong. In those days that included some harsh punishments.

The ultrasound can reveal if the heart is not beating correctly or if there is a hole in the heart, or if the valves are not functioning correctly. The ultrasound is not able to cure the heart of its problems. It can only reveal what the problems are. So it is with God's law. Romans 3 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin." The law reveals the truth that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It shows that we can never be justified or declared not guilty through the law. This is only possible through Jesus. It leads us to Christ in the sense that we are led to see there is no hope for us in any ourselves or any other religion. As we sang in the hymn last Sunday, "In Christ alone, my hope is found." We also sang another hymn with the words, "My hope is built on nothing less, Than Jesus blood and righteousness."

Please allow another illustration from mathematics to show why we cannot go back to being justified or declared not guilty by keeping the law. 2 times 2 is 4. 3 times 3 is 9. 12 x 12 is 144. 16 x 16 is ????. Now let's make it easy. 2 x 0 is 0. 10 x 0 is 0. 1000 x 0 is 0. If you try to add your keeping of the law which falls short of God's glory to what Christ has done it is like multiply what you do by 0. Christ plus nothing equals everything. Christ plus anything equals nothing.

Life in Christ

The life you have in Christ is everything. It is the ultimate freedom. Instead of being a slave to the law you are now sons of God through Jesus. "You are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ." In chapter 4 it says, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." He even sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we cry out, "Abba Father." Because we are sons of God through Jesus we have the full position of being God's dear children. This applies to every Christian as Paul reminds us "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ." In the Greek household there was a huge difference between being a son with full rights of sonship and the position of a slave.

Think of the son who came home to his father in Jesus' amazing story of the lost son. Here is this rebellious younger son who goes to his father and says, "Father, give me my share of the estate." There is no love in these words, only selfishness and greed. He has the audacity to demand his share of the estate even before his father dies. He has no regard for the financial hardship this might place on his father who loves him. What does he do with the money? He invests it. He invests it in wild living. He loses everything. He finds himself so destitute that he has to resort to feeding pigs. He longs to eat pods the pigs were eating. He thinks of the fine meals he once ate in his father's house and the fine meals his loving father serves the humble servants. Then he comes to his senses. He develops a plan to go back to his father and say, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." Did he hope that he might prove himself a worthy servant and once more experience love for the father he had abandoned?

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." The son speaks "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And what does the father say? He tells his servants to bring the best robe and put it on him. He asks them to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. He even calls for them to prepare the fattened calf to celebrate the coming home of his son, a feast of all feasts. Joyfully the father proclaims, "The son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found." And they celebrated.

So we celebrate. We sing. We dance. We feast. We smile. We laugh. We are home. We are God's children. We are God's sons. The Holy Spirit will not let us forget that fact. He testifies to us that we are God's children. The sun is rising, the roosters are crowing, the birds are singing. I am sleeping in my Father's house. I feel the ring on my finger. I can still taste the succulent fattened calf and the nice warm tortillas that went with it. I am getting up early. I want to have breakfast with my dad. I cannot get enough of his love for me. In Jesus you have this love of your heavenly Father. "Goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

How do I know that this wonderful love of my Father is real to me? It has not been an easy week. My faith has been weak. I have given into sinful thoughts and actions. I am the prodigal or lost son. This love is real because of Jesus. "For all of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ." You can feel it. You can see it with your eyes of faith. It covers your sin. It is the robe of Jesus' righteousness won for you by his perfect life and perfect death. You were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son

and the Holy Spirit. You were given Christ in your baptism. You put on Christ. You are Abraham's seed because you believe in a righteousness outside of yourself that saves you and is found only in Christ.

The sparrow does not want to go back to the cage to be tormented by the mean boy. The son does not want to go back to a life of sin and feeding pigs. Stay with Christ and the unfailing love of your heavenly Father that is found in Christ alone. Amen.