

## **Dwelling in the Word**

### **ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study**

**Friday, August 10**

**The Rev. Timothy J. Wengert - Galatians 5**

In the name of Jesus. Amen

“We confess that we are in bondage to sin” or “... captive to sin.” We have all said those words, as part of the service for confession and forgiveness. Well, Paul and I have good news for those of you captive and in bondage to sin! “In Christ you are free!” Free from sin, free from law, free from death, free from the devil and evil, free from guilt and shame, free from doubt and despair, free from working your way into God’s good graces! You are free! I’m surprised you don’t start cheering! Can I at least hear an “Amen”?

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul begins chapter five of his remarkable letter. This verse meant so much to Martin Luther that at nearly the time he was lecturing on Galatians and preparing those lectures for publication, he changed his name to reflect this Scripture verse. His parents spelled their family name l-u-d-h-e-r, but by changing the “d” to a “t,” Luther was playing on the Greek word, “eleutherius,” the free man. In fact, on twenty-four separate occasions from this time he signed his name “Eleutherius,” before finally shortening it to Luther.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” Paul’s text always makes me think of that wonderful hymn by the Danish poet, Hans Brorson set to music by Edvard Grieg, “God’s Son, God’s Son has made me free.” And just like Luther and Paul and Brorson, you are free! Amen?

So, now that you free from doing anything, what are you going to do? This question is the key to chapter five of Galatians and to truly *Christian* ethics, “What are you going to do, now that you don’t *have* to do anything?” Today and tomorrow, we are going to focus on this

surprising insight into the Christian life from Paul and Luther: We are truly free! We are free from imagining that what makes us Christians is following rules or keeping commandments. Faith in Christ frees us! So, now that you have all this free time, what are you going to do?

The first thing that Paul points out in Galatians 5 is quite simple: “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Our world is filled with religious and ethical hucksters—we all have encountered them, and some of us may even be sellers of religious morality—people who want to take Christians captive to some law or another. In Paul’s case, as he explains in 5:2-12, there were folks in the Galatian community who wanted to make people captive to the *biblical* law of circumcision. In Luther’s day, leaders wanted to captivate people by their feelings of guilt and keep God’s mercy from them by commanding them to earn it. What happens in our day? According to a recent poll, almost half the Lutherans in the United States think that we are saved by our works, by our moral rectitude! We are not! We are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone! How does this happen? Christ frees us from the yoke of slavery, from the law and the doing of the law. Christian freedom can never, ever be used as an excuse to impose any law on Christians as a means to salvation. Otherwise, as Paul says, “Christ will be of no benefit to you.” If works of law, even God’s law, sneak in anywhere, like yeast, it’ll change whole loaf; you’ll lose your freedom.

The second response Paul gives to our question comes in verse thirteen. “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” When I was a parish pastor, I remember Ed, whose wife had been Lutheran for years and who was finally becoming a member of our congregation. He and MaryJo were blessed with four rambunctious children. So, there we sat in the new members’ class, and I explained to him the central truth of the gospel: “We do not climb up to God with our works and rule-keeping and decision-making, but in Christ, God comes down to us in unconditional love and grace. “So, it’s a gift,” he asked. “Yes,” I responded, sure that I was making progress.

“And there’s nothing we *have* to do.” “Right you are, Ed.” There was a pause. “Well, just don’t tell the kids.” In Romans, Paul put it this way, “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” And Paul responds, “How can we who have died to sin still live in it?” And, indeed, we have died with Christ in Baptism. We are not simply sinners; God declares us saints.

Freedom is not an excuse for us to harm our neighbor but instead Christian freedom allows us, Paul writes, “to be slaves to one another through love.” This single verse became the theme of Luther’s famous essay, *The Freedom of a Christian*. Here’s the way he put it there: “I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” And how do these seemingly contradictory ideas fit together? We are free through faith in Christ! Trusting in God’s unconditional promise of grace in Christ, we are joined to Christ by the marriage of faith and exchange our sin for his righteousness. We are, therefore, a priestly, royal people. But this freedom, far from being an excuse to serve ourselves, makes us free to imitate Christ by serving our neighbor. So, Luther concludes, “Although Christians are thus free from all works, they ought in this liberty to empty themselves, take upon themselves the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of [human beings], be found in human form, and serve, help, and in every way deal with their neighbor as they see God through Christ has dealt and still deals with them. This they should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval... Although I am an unworthy and condemned [person], my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart and with an eager will do all things that I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered

himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.”

Paul’s third insight into our Christian life of freedom contrasts “works of the flesh” to the “fruit of the Spirit.” The former are examples of self-indulgence and the latter a description of Christ’s own life of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” There’s no law against these things, since they arise not from commands and coercion but from faith and trust in Christ alone. Please note, however, that the distinction between flesh and Spirit is not the same as the difference between “material” things and “spiritual” things. Luther noticed that when the Bible uses the term “flesh” it usually refers to the way we are “curved in upon ourselves.” The Spirit is the work and fruit of the Holy Spirit who gives us faith and makes us holy right in the middle of our material world.

In a Lutheran confession of faith called the Formula of Concord, which was written thirty years after Luther’s death, the authors knew how important this distinction between flesh and Spirit is. So they wrote in article six of that document that outside of faith people may perform works, but they do them either because they fear punishment or want reward. “However, when people are born again through the Spirit of God and set free from the law (that is, liberated from its driving powers and driven by the Spirit of Christ), they ... do everything, insofar as they are reborn, from a free and merry spirit.” I love that line: “from a free and merry spirit.” It reminds me of the closing scene in the old “Andy Griffith Show,” while they’re rolling the credits. And there, in black and white, walking down a path in the woods is Opie, fishing pole in hand, whistling. That’s the free and merry spirit. That’s the freedom of the gospel. You are free! So, outside of whistling, what are *you* going to do, now that you don’t *have* to do anything? Amen?

**Questions for discussion:**

1. How are you captive to sin? “You are free in Christ!” This is freedom from law and also from guilt, sin, death, evil, and trying to earn God’s favor. In what aspects of your life is this freedom hardest to believe?
2. Paul outlines three things we can do now that we do not *have* to do anything. Discuss how you have been tempted to be legalistic (#1), have fallen into the trap of making God’s grace an excuse to sin (#2), or have experienced the “free and merry spirit” and fruits of faith in your life (#3).

Friday

Topic: “Free in Christ!” (Galatians 5)

Text: Galatians 5:1-26

Booklet: If there is a booklet, then I would say just include Galatians 5 and the two discussion questions listed above.

For the screens, here are the biblical and other texts I cite:

- “For freedom Christ has set us free!” –Gal. 5:1
- “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” –Gal. 5:1
- “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” –Gal. 5:13
- “I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” –Martin Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*
- “Although Christians are thus free from all works, they ought in this liberty to empty themselves, take upon themselves the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of [human beings], be found in human form, and serve, help, and in every way deal with their neighbor as they see God through Christ has dealt and still deals with them. This they should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval... Although I am an unworthy and condemned [person], my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that

this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart and with an eager will do all things that I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.” – Martin Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*

- “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.” –Gal. 5:22-23
- “However, when people are born again through the Spirit of God and set free from the law (that is, liberated from its driving powers and driven by the Spirit of Christ), they ... do everything, insofar as they are reborn, from a free and merry spirit.” –The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VI

I would be more than happy to have my talk (pp. 1-4) on the teleprompter. I am assuming that there will be no time for concluding comments.