

June 22, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

The Scandal of the Cross

Galatians 5:1-12

From the beginning of time, one of Satan's most effective tactics has been to pit human achievement against divine grace; and incite men to try and work their way to God. Galatians sets the record straight – ***it is the gospel of grace that saves men and women and sets them free from the bondage of sin and death and condemnation and trying to earn their salvation – and sets them free to be fully satisfied in God.*** From chapter five on, Paul begins to give us some of the practical implications of the gospel of grace. And he starts here in verse 1 with freedom: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.* Galatians 5:1.

We saw a couple of weeks ago that the word order in the Greek lends itself to two equally true and complementary propositions. ***'In the freedom therefore which Christ us made free, stand fast.'*** Firstly, the word Paul uses means ***a current condition resulting from a past action. Christ has made us free – therefore stay free.*** Don't let something rob you of that freedom – especially things like circumcision, rituals, and days and months and seasons and years, or all the ways we have tried to be deserving of the grace of God.

The other way to understand this is just as true: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free.* That is, ***the will of Christ for your life is freedom.*** God wants us to walk in ***uncompromising, unrelenting, unconquerable freedom.*** Freedom from the sinful passions of the flesh – freedom from guilt and worry and depression and fear – freedom to love God supremely and love our neighbor as ourself – freedom to live on this earth as aliens and strangers and not be seduced away from that freedom back to slavery again.

We also understood this freedom that Christ won for us is experienced as ***release, reconciliation, restoration, relationship and rapture.*** Everyone of us is in bondage to sin until by faith we receive the gift of God's grace to release us. Furthermore we are estranged and alienated from God because of sin and through the sacrifice of Jesus we are reconciled to God. The freedom the gospel proclaims is not only release and reconciliation – but restoration of sight. The scales fall from our eyes and we see clearly for the first time. This freedom is also about a new relationship with God as sons – not slaves. A slave can never be quite sure that he has done enough to please the master – but a son can rest in the relationship he has with his father by virtue of his birth. And finally, this freedom brings rapture – another word for joy. Full freedom is full of joy because there is nothing you need to fear, nothing you need to worry about, nothing that nags at your conscience, nothing that separates you from God – and everything works to increase your joy in Christ – not to take away from it.

'...therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1. That is, don't get caught with your neck in the yoke. The yoke is referring to a common farm implement that was fastened on the necks of the oxen or horses to enable them to pull the plow or harrow or wagon or whatever the farmer wanted. The point was that it was a work tool and Paul uses it here to invoke the image of working for your salvation. When you set aside grace – all you have left is the yoke, and you are working hard trying to raise a crop of goodness. But *It was for freedom that Christ set us free,* and it is in this freedom we need to stay.

Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Galatians 5:2-3 What Paul is saying here is that if you insist on Christ and something to guarantee your salvation – then the grace of God will not be a factor in your life. Paul is not saying that circumcision is wrong and un-circumcision is right and what pleases God is that we not be circumcised. That makes un-circumcision just as much a stumbling block as circumcision. ***I believe the point Paul wants to make is that any attempt to coax God into feeling better about us is wrong. Any thought that some outward act of obedience can be offered to God as bribe which He is then obligated to reward is wrong.***

With the Galatians, the main issue was whether or not you were circumcised and what exactly were the benefits of that. And Paul says that it doesn't do a thing for you in terms of salvation or sanctification – in fact, it works against you since by trusting in circumcision, you lose out on grace – AND you have to be word-perfect on all the rest of the law of God. The grace that comes to us from the cross of Christ will not be ours if we try and earn it by working for it. ***That mindset dishonors Christ, nullifies grace, and removes the stumbling block of the cross.*** It is only when we admit that we have nothing to offer and accept the grace that we benefit from Christ.

My daughters have the chore of doing the dishes at our house for the most part. And sometimes, they would say rarely, I come into the kitchen and help them. Now if my daughter would say, 'No, Dad, I don't need any help', she would be missing out on the grace – that is, the grace that would help her to do the dishes would not benefit her in the least. And that is what we do when we look to our own efforts instead of relying on Christ.

To not accept the grace is to adopt the mindset of a debtor. That is what Paul says in verse 3: *And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.* The word Paul uses that is translated 'under obligation' means debtor – one who is obligated. In Classical Greek it referred to someone who had to make amends for some transgression he had done. But God does not deal with us as debtors – as those who must pay Him back for something He has done. Psalm 116:13 says, *'What shall I give unto the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will [take] the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord'* The psalmist is not asking the question in verse 12 with hopes of finding a good enough gift for God – it is rhetorical: What could I possibly give to God that He doesn't already have? Answer: NOTHING! The gift is not for God – it is for me – the cup of salvation.

Sadly, among many Christians there is a very common view I call the Debtor's Ethic, that sounds like this: ***Since God has done so much for me, I will spend the rest of my life paying back the debt I owe – even though I'm pretty sure I will never be able to completely wipe the slate clean.*** Even though most Christians would not say that they are trying to earn their salvation – in practice they far too easily adopt a debtor mentality when they start adding to grace by requiring certain things. There is an old hymn called '*At the Cross*' and part of one verse says: ***But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; Dear Lord I give myself away, tis' all that I can do.*** All that we can do is take the cup of salvation and rejoice in the grace that flows from the cross to us.

This debtor ethic is wrong because although true gratitude is in one sense a feeling of joyful indebtedness – we somehow turn this delight in God's generosity into a feeling that we must somehow pay Him back, and grace is turned into a business transaction. ***True gratitude means that you don't feel you have to pay Him back.*** It is also wrong because the Debtor's Ethic demeans the cross of Christ. His death on the cross completely satisfied the debt we owed to God and ***any attempt to add to that is an insult to its infinite worth.*** It is also wrong because this Debtor's Ethic overlooks the ongoing gift of grace in our lives to do anything pleasing to God. It overlooks that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives we can do nothing, we can offer nothing, not even thanksgiving and praise, to God. ***It overlooks the fact that even our gifts to God are firstly gifts from God. 'Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights...'*** James 1:17

And what this mindset does is sever us from Christ. *You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.* Galatians 5:4 Paul uses strong language here – he says that those who try to be justified by their own efforts, cut themselves off from Christ. In classical Greek that word means to render inactive, or put out of use, to cancel or bring to nothing. The KJV puts it this way: *Christ is become of no effect unto you.'* ***We need to understand first of all that the issue is not eternal salvation but effective relationship with Christ.*** We render grace ineffective in our lives when we try to pay back what we think we owe.

The truth is we owed a debt we could never hope to repay – and the only way to deal with an insurmountable debt is by grace. Grace is getting what we don't deserve – and we deserved death – but by grace we received life. ***And grace is only available to the humble.*** The Bible says that *'God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble'.* The proud don't know what to do with grace – they can't even recognize it when they see it. We all know, intellectually at least, that salvation is by grace and we are so thankful – but then we think that sanctification is by works and we turn our gratitude into paying back the debt. But real freedom only comes from the experience of our dependence upon the grace of God. The grace of God is the power of God to do for us and do in us, what we could never do.

So Paul continues: *For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.* Galatians 5:5 The divine side of grace is the power of God to us – the human side of grace is faith to receive the grace and stand in it. It is the Spirit of God within that gives us the hope that what He has begun in us, He will bring to a final and glorious completion. And Paul says that ***nothing can add anything to the work of grace: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision means anything, but faith working through love.*** Galatians 5:6 It is *faith working through love* – that is, ***our faith activated by His love.*** Paul said in Galatians 2:20 that it was *God who loved me and gave Himself for me* that activated his own faith. Unless God had loved us first we would not even think of loving Him – unless the Father's own heart drew us to Christ, we would have remained in our sin and rebellion and hostility to God.

And then Paul goes on to chastise the Galatians: *You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you.* Galatians 5:7-8 The athletic image Paul conjures up here was very familiar to anyone of that time. In athletic contests it was common for runners to seek a personal advantage by hindering – the word means to impede or delay – other runners by cutting them off in the race. And so Paul asks them, 'Who has cut you off from the way of grace?' And the implied answer is those preachers of the law and grace – the ones who insisted on circumcision as a means to salvation.

He says, *A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.* Galatians 5:9 Just a little bit of the lie makes the whole truth a lie. Just a little self-effort – just a little standing on your own merits – cuts you off from grace. But then he says, *I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.* Galatians 5:10 Paul had confidence – not in the Galatians **but in the power of God in them**, that they would eventually see through those self-promoters all the way to the grace of God. And that those who were preaching this stuff would themselves be cut off from the way of salvation and experience God's judgment and eternal damnation.

Finally, Paul disassociates himself from any discussion that he himself was a promoter of circumcision as a means of salvation: *But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.* Galatians 5:11 If it were true, as some evidently said, that Paul believed in and preached circumcision – then why, he asks, was he still the object of persecution from these same practitioners of the law? If that were true he says, then the scandal of the cross is cancelled or nullified.

So what is the scandal of the cross? The word Paul uses is **skandalizo** and is related to **skandalon** from which we get the word **scandal**. The use of this word in the New Testament primarily means offense, or stumbling block – something that causes people to stumble or take offense. And that really describes a scandal – it causes people to take offense or to stumble somehow. Who can forget the money scandal of the PTL Club and Jim and Tammy Faye Baker or the moral scandal of Jimmy Swaggart, and even more recently the sex and drug escapades of Ted Haggard? These were huge stumbling blocks and great offenses not only to Christians but those Christians were trying to reach. In the same way, **the scandal of the cross is a great offense to those who think they can do something to merit God's favor.**

And Paul says that if he would endorse the preaching of circumcision as an element of grace – then the scandal of the cross would be nullified. And I don't think he meant here the scandal that we would normally think of that surrounds the crucifixion of Christ – the scandal and offense it was to Jews to be hung on a criminal's cross. That was seen as the curse of God – definitely not a blessing, and that was scandalous to the Jews. I believe what Paul was referring to as **the scandal of the cross was the scandal of grace. Grace is scandalous because grace is getting what we do not deserve, and could never earn.**

It is scandalous that one of the thieves on the cross beside Jesus got grace. He didn't do anything to deserve Paradise – in fact one of the gospels indicates that he was reviling Jesus to begin with. It is scandalous that Ted Bundy came to Christ on death row. It is scandalous that Christians preach a gospel that says that no one is too evil, too wretched, too morally marred to find grace at the cross. We operate for the most part on merit without even realizing it. The thing we pride ourselves on, especially here in America, is pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But the scandal of the cross is grace – unmerited, undeserving, unlooked-for grace.

In Luke 15, there is the story of the son who demanded his inheritance from his father ahead of time, wasted it all in living for himself, ended up in a pig sty, eating their food – and then came to his senses and returned to his home, not expecting to be a son anymore but a slave. And his father showered him with grace, cleaned him up and gave a great feast in honor of his return. **And we see the scandal of grace written all over this story.** But what is even more arresting than this wretched excuse for a son receiving what he did not deserve – is the reaction of the other son who had stayed. Listen to what he says when he found out who the party was for: *Then he became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. But he replied to his father, 'Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders; yet you never gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.'* Luke 15:28-30

This is the Debtor's Ethic: **'I slaved for you, I always obeyed you, I was the good boy and worked hard for you – and you never gave me anything.'** And he was scandalized by the grace his brother received. From the earliest days of Christianity people were afraid that God's grace might be misunderstood. When people find out that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, and not by living a holy life, they may be tempted to give lip service to God and keep right on sinning. That's certainly possible. But it's not our job to sort that out. God is fully capable of separating those who give lip service and don't get grace from those who come desperately seeking what they do not deserve and find grace where they did not expect it.

Someone once confronted Martin Luther, on his promotion of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith – that is we are saved by grace through faith alone, with the remark, ***“If this is true, a person could simply live as he pleased!”*** ***“Indeed!”*** answered Luther. ***“Now, what pleases you?”*** The truth is grace, God's grace changes you. What pleased us before grace no longer pleases us – before grace we lived to please ourselves – now we live to please God. Augustine's view of grace was ***“Love God and do as you please.”*** Which is never a license to sin because ***grace transforms sinners into saints*** - it takes murderers and makes them apostles – it transforms cowards into lions of the faith – it turns the Debtor's Ethic into the sinners plea. ***People who are scandalized by the cross have never experienced the life-changing power of grace.*** I assure you that grace is not a scandal in heaven.

When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace because no one deserves it. There will only be one contest in heaven. When we look back and see what we were before, when we see the pit from which he rescued us, when we recall how confused we were, when we remember how God reached out and brought us into His family, and how He held us in His hand, and when we see Jesus who loved us and gave Himself for us, the only contest will be to see which of us will sing the loudest: ***“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”***

Our great and gracious Father in Heaven,

You know well how often we fail and fall, the disturbing times of deadness and coldness in our hearts, our inability to do anything for Your glory all our vain efforts to do on our own what only You can do in us. Rain on us again those showers of converting grace that turn the debtor's ethic into the sinners plea. Cause our souls to breathe after holiness – to a constant longing after You. Teach us to live as sons and not slaves – to receive the gift of grace with glad hearts and not look for ways to repay the debt of love You already paid on the cross. Grant that we would live in the freedom You won for us and not labor under the yoke of anything. Ignite our hearts to praise and adore and magnify You with the music of heaven, and make our lives a perfume of praise to You. Awaken the souls of those here still caught in sin's treacherous deceit so that they too may live in the liberating grip of grace. May we live as those who have been made glad in God and live to make others glad in You as well, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***