

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Reformation -- October 30th and November 2nd, 2008

Gal. 5:1-6

¹It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Dear brothers and sisters who are sure of our salvation.

Today we celebrate the Reformation. What exactly is the Reformation and why do we take one Sunday each year to celebrate the Reformation? The reformation that we are celebrating had its simple beginnings October 31st, 1517 in Wittenberg Germany, when Martin Luther wrote 95 statements about indulgences that he was seeking answers to. What followed was more than Martin Luther could have ever imagined. Those 95 statements turned into something much larger where a reforming took place about what was being taught in the churches at this time. The three main things that came out of the Reformation were 1) We are saved by Grace alone. 2) We are saved by faith alone in Jesus' work on the cross and 3) We are saved by having faith in what was taught in Scripture alone. If we were going to try to boil the Reformation down to a simple word – that word might be certainty. What Martin Luther and the many other people who joined with him wanted was spiritual certainty. And this certainty was a certainty that could only come by digging deeper into God's Word and trusting in his promises of free and full grace. But many people ask, why is this so important for us today? Let me ask you a question and then you may figure out why this certainty that the Reformation gave God's people is so important.

If you were to die tonight, do you think you would go to heaven? Let me ask the question another way. Are you SURE you would go to heaven? As we just said before, Martin Luther lived about five hundred years ago. For the first part of his life, he was scared to death of not going to heaven. He spent nearly every waking moment doing whatever he could to assure himself that he would go to heaven. He became a monk; he tried to follow all the rules of the church at the time, the Roman Catholic Church. He did everything he was told, but he still wasn't sure that he was going to heaven. In fact, the harder he tried to do what the church taught, the less sure he became that he would ever make it to heaven. That's when Martin Luther stopped asking the church what to do to get to heaven and started asking God. Martin Luther turned back to God's Word and there he found what he was looking for. He finally knew for sure that he would go to heaven. Are you sure that you're going to heaven? God wants you to be sure. The next question I will ask is: What makes you sure that you're going to heaven? That is what our text for this morning will bring out.

Theme: We Can Be Sure We Are Going To Heaven

- 1. Not by following rules**
- 2. Only by following Jesus' work**

The text we have before us was written to the believers in the area of Galatia. This portion of God's Word and the whole book of Galatians was written to bring assurance to God's people through God's grace and not by following the right rules. For instance, the Jews in Galatia thought that they had a sure way to heaven. They told themselves over and over again, "I'm sure I'm going to heaven because I follow the rules." The rules were the laws given to them through Moses, and one of the biggest rules was circumcising every male in the household. Very often the Jews wanted everyone else to follow their rules as well. That's what

was happening when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. After Paul left Galatia, the Jews went to work trying to convince everyone that the only sure way to heaven was to follow all the rules of Moses - especially circumcising the males.

Many other churches after the Jews have also tried to convince people that the only sure way to heaven is to follow the rules. Many Christian churches have built their walls and foundations on the idea that you must earn your way to heaven. If you commit a sin, you must confess that sin, every single sin. And for every sin that you confess, you must do penance. You must say the Lord's Prayer so many times, or recite your special prayers, or do so many good things to make up for the bad you've done. Still today you can find people confessing, praying, and trying to do all the right things as they try to follow the rules.

What about you? Are you sure you're going to heaven because you follow the rules? Do you think God should show favor to you because you're such a good Christian? Let's make a list. You go to church regularly. Maybe you even go to Bible Class. You serve or have served on the Church Council, or some other board or committee. You've helped out around church numerous times. You give regular generous offerings. You send your children to the day school or Lutheran high school. You pray before you eat and before you go to bed. You follow the rules! Of course you're going to heaven! Right?! NO!

Following the rules is not a sure way to heaven. Rather it is a sure way to slavery. Listen again to what Paul says to the people of Galatia: **“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”** Paul makes two points. First, if you want to get to heaven by following the rules, you have to follow all of the rules. All of them, all of the time. God says, **“Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 1:2)**. You can only get to heaven by following all the rules, and following all of them perfectly; you have to be holy. For the Jews that didn't mean just getting circumcised, but doing everything written in the law. For you that doesn't mean just coming to church on Sunday and helping out once in awhile the rest of the week. It means being perfect in everything you do, everything you say, everything you think must be perfect.

Second, if you want to get to heaven by following the rules, forget about Christ. Then he is no value to you at all; you have been separated from him. To follow the rules to get to heaven means that you are on your own. It means that you don't need Jesus. Either he does it all or you do it all. Don't try to earn God's favor by following the rules and then when you fall short, ask him to make up the rest. That's taking what he is willing to give you for free and throwing it back in his face saying, 'I don't need all of it; I can do some of it myself.' No, to follow the rules is to discount Christ's work for your own and therefore to be on your own. To follow the rules is to make yourself a slave who is in constant doubt.

2. Only by following Jesus' work

To those who say that I'm sure I'm going to heaven because I follow the rules. I say Really? I could never be sure by following the rules because I can't follow all the rules and I can't do it on my own. I am sure that I'm going to heaven though...just for a different reason. I'm sure I'm going to heaven because I follow Christ. To follow Christ is a sure way to freedom. God says that I must be perfect to get to heaven. If I can't be perfect on my own because I can't follow all of the rules, how can I get to heaven? Ahh, the answer is there; one must simply look in the right place. Rather than asking the church how to get to heaven, we can ask God himself. He gives us a much better answer. He tells us that he will make us perfect...through his Son, Jesus Christ.

God sent his Son to keep all of the rules in our place. God never said that he would overlook the rules, that he would forget about the laws that he gave, or that he would sweep our sins under the rug. God is a just God. He demands perfection. However, God is also a loving God so he provides perfection. Because we can't keep his rules ourselves, he came down to keep them for us. When Jesus lived on this earth as a man, he lived with the same rules as every other man. He lived under the authority of his parents, of his government, and of his God. When he lived on this earth, he kept God's law perfectly.

Then God made the best trade known to man. God took our sin, our disobedience, and our failure to follow the rules and gave it to Jesus. Jesus paid the penalty for us when he died on the cross. As a result, God forgave our sins. In exchange God took Jesus' perfect life and gave it to us. As a result, we are perfect. In Christ you are perfect! Therefore, you can be absolutely sure that you are going to heaven. You can say with complete confidence, 'I'm sure I'm going to heaven because I follow Christ.'

Paul said it this way, "**But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.**" Paul and all believers eagerly await the righteousness for which we hope. That righteousness is the perfection that God demands and the perfection that God gives us through Jesus. That we "hope" for that righteousness does not mean that we merely wish for it, but rather that we expect it because God has promised to give it to us. By faith we trust God's promise and therefore are sure we're going to heaven.

The hope, the certainty, that we have gives us freedom. "**It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.**" That freedom is freedom from the law, from the rules. That freedom is knowing that we don't have to keep God's law perfectly to get to heaven. That freedom is never having to doubt, never having to wonder if I've been good enough to get to heaven. That freedom is being able to say, "I'm sure I'm going to heaven." Paul also encourages, "**Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**" No doubt about it - the people of this world will try to rob you of your freedom. They will try to take away your certainty of salvation. They do not want you to think that you can be so sure that you're going to heaven.

Look at what happened to those we heard about in our Scripture readings for today. Look at Daniel. When he was told he couldn't pray to his God, he did anyway. And he was willing to pay the price of being thrown into the lion's den. But, he wasn't afraid; he knew that even if he should die, he would go to heaven. Look at what Jesus told his disciples. "**Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over...and flog you...all men will hate you because of me.**" (Mt 10:17, 23a). Don't give in. Stand firm. Jesus promises, "**those who stand firm to the end will be saved.**" (Mt 10:23b). Don't let men tell you that you must follow the rules. Don't let them take away your freedom.

Rather, stand firm in Christ. Live every day confident that if it is your last day on earth, you'll spend the next day in heaven. Stand firm as many before you have done. Thank God for men like Martin Luther who refused to let anyone take away this certainty. Stand firm for your children and the many that come after you. Let them see and hear you say, 'I'm sure I'm going to heaven, not because I follow the rules, but because I follow Christ. Amen.