

## Follow Christ in Freedom

† Saved from legalism (vv.11-16)

† Living by faith in Christ alone (vv.17-21)

In the name of Jesus, who with His blood has set us free, dearly redeemed family of God:

Did you ever stop to think there is really only one doctrine, one main teaching in the Bible? It all comes down to two words: *Jesus Saves*. But there are three main points to that doctrine. In theological terms: *Justification, Means of Grace, Christian Cross*. In laymen's terms this hits close to home. *Jesus Saves – How much? How do you know? Who cares?* As *We Preach Christ Crucified* in our Midweek Lenten services, you see how much Jesus cares and how the crosses He gives help us care. *How do you know?* – connects the pipeline of God's grace to our hearts by Word and Sacraments. No gas explosions here because *Jesus Saves. How much?* – right here in our text. Chains of guilt would have shackled us if not for this incident between two leading apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul. **Follow Christ in Freedom...**

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Almost every time Peter comes up in the Bible, I'm embarrassed to admit how much I'm like him. Sure there was that good confession: ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*** (Matthew 16:16) And I wouldn't mind being Peter when he comforted Jesus: ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** (John 6:68 NIV) But usually Peter needs scolding from Jesus. Remember? ***"Get behind me, Satan!"*** (Matthew 16:23) Soon after his beautiful confession Peter told Jesus not to die on the cross. Peter was quick with tongue and sword. Remember cutting off the servant's ear in the garden? But put Peter in a courtyard with a servant girl, and he crumbles before the rooster crows.

Do you find you can be brave most anytime, except when it really counts? Would it be easier for you to rescue someone from a burning car? Or snatch them from the flames of hell as we heard in Jude (v.23) a few weeks ago? We sing so bravely God's praises in church about our **Freedom in Christ**. But does it fly out the window at home when we fail to care about other people's feelings, especially our spouse? Do we wrap each other up in guilt instead of God's grace? Or use grace to excuse lazy?

One thing I admire about the Apostle Paul, he did not let problems fester. Paul loved the Gospel and his fellow Christians enough to guard God's truth. This would have cost us a clear conscience and all hope of heaven. Not eating meat on Fridays would have been the least of your worries. No crab or lobster, no ribeye, no marbled meat because Moses' law said all fat belongs to God. Ride an Israeli bus sometime. Ask why ultra Orthodox Jewish men won't sit down and why Moses' Law forbade women to leave home a week or so each month. ***"The circumcision group"*** had a whole body of Law for every aspect of life. It was meant to shield God's chosen nation until the Messiah came to take away sin. Keeping Moses' Law now only leads away from the Messiah who has come in the Person of Jesus Christ.

This was culturally sensitive, especially in Antioch. Do you remember how the congregation in Antioch started? When the first Christian martyr was stoned to death by the Jewish mob, Paul was still called Saul of Tarsus. While Stephen lay dying, Saul was guarding the coats of the killers. Christian church members scattered, preaching the Word wherever they went. ***"Some...went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*** (Acts 11:20f) Antioch was the first Gentile congregation. Here believers were first called, "Christians." Antioch was started by laymen.

Naturally Peter and the rest enjoyed Christian **Freedom** among the Gentiles at Antioch. Eggs and bacon, anyone? Now imagine some church officials come here, and tell us to sing our hymns in Chinese.

No knives and forks, only chopsticks – made mandatory for salvation. “I’d go somewhere else!” you say? If Paul had not stood firm to **Follow Christ in Freedom**, there would be nowhere else. Peter separated from the Gentile believers and went back to living under Moses’ Law as if his salvation depended on it. “*The circumcision group*” insisted. Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews feared them more than God.

Public sin St. Paul had to rebuke publicly: “*We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*” All of us inherited our parents’ sinful nature from Adam. We cannot keep God’s Law perfectly as it demands. But this is no excuse. God’s Law condemns everyone who fails to be holy in thought, word and deed. Even for St. Peter himself to make good works mandatory for salvation denies *Jesus Saves*. Christ’s church needed to be **Saved from legalism to Follow Christ in Freedom...**

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That does not mean good works are not necessary. Remember some Friends of China pastors telling about a church Beijing where U.S. Presidents attended over the years? 4,000 adults every Sunday – double that now? But before service one Sunday a pastor scolded worshipers for coming too early. “Church begins at 8:00 AM; don’t come at 4:30 to get a seat!” When **Freedom in Christ** is your joy, you don’t need the Law’s demands. Good works give evidence that you are **Living by faith in Christ alone**.

Only Christ can make faith burn so brightly, not under Law but by the Good News that your sins are all forgiven. The Holy Spirit does use heavy crosses and hard times to help us feel our thirst, but not as punishment. Our sins were all punished on Jesus. There is no double jeopardy with God. We need God’s Law as the scalpel that cuts out our sinful pride when we look down on others as worse sinners than we are. Paul could not see this until Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus. With his spiritual eyes opened he could finally admit, “Here I stand as a sinner” – condemned under the Law like a tsunami. But once Paul died to the Law, he could really live in Christ and for **Christ alone**.

Think of your heart transplant. We’ve all had one, right? Your old heart thinks of you and no one else. It cries like a baby when it can’t get its way, pouts like a child if things don’t go right. It blames everyone else for your problems and lets anger rule. It won’t forgive. But Christ and His cross come for us as for Paul, and faith cries out with David, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit [sic] from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.*” (Psalm 51:10-13 KJV)

Your old heart must die, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your new heart can live. Don’t go back and wire up the Law again. It’s like a power grid where we keep stepping over the line as *transgressors* like Paul and Peter and everyone except our Lord Jesus. **In Christ alone** we live. Jesus sparks your new heart beating for God. Our old sinful nature wants to reject the transplant, but God’s Word and sacrament are the medicine that keeps it beating, **Living by faith in Christ alone**.

“*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” My old self is dead and dying every day because I keep drowning it in daily sorrow for my sin and faith in Christ’s forgiveness. Don’t pull back from your fellow forgiven sinner-saints. Wired to God by **Faith in Christ alone**, He wants us wired to each other. Only by grace can we stand – free of sin, forgiven by God, mercied in Christ. No wasted power here. Nothing is in vain. Even conflict can be used by God to help us **Follow Christ in Freedom – Saved from legalism, Living by faith in Christ alone**. Peter accepted Paul’s rebuke. And still today, thank God the message rings loud and clear: *Jesus Saves* ! Amen.