

Reformation

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Christ's Teaching has Freed Us from the Law's Tyranny

St. John 8:31-36

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Dear friends in Christ Jesus, in whose Word we are indeed free;

Arbeit Macht Frei. Those three words over the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp and others are horrible. They were not true for one thing. For another, they had a harsh psychological impact on the thousands of prisoners who passed under them every day. The hopelessness under their lie must have been powerful. Those words mean, Work sets you free.

The author of a book about Rudolph Hess and Auschwitz puts forth the theory that Hess used these words as a kind of mystical declaration. Hess believed, as the author wrote, that "self-sacrifice in the form of endless labor does in itself bring a kind of spiritual freedom. " What nonsense Hess believed.

At the time of the Reformation, the church was telling Christians essentially the same thing. Sadly, a large part of the visible Christian church today continues to perpetrate this lie. The lie is that by self-sacrifice in the form of works according to the law, you will accomplish spiritual freedom. This is a lie and does not work. In fact, the more you labor under those words, the more hopelessness sets in. This is something Martin Luther experienced in his life.

Works do not free us from the law's tyranny. **Christ's Teaching has Freed Us from the Law's Tyranny.** Christ's teaching is the truth about saving righteousness. Christ's teaching sets us free for genuine discipleship.

The first two verses of Jesus' words, "to the Jews who had believed him," are my confirmation verse. I was thinking about the ministry at that time, and Pastor Kell wanted to remind me always not only what defines a disciple, but also to use the tool, Scripture alone, should God call me into the ministry of the gospel. It is there we receive Christ's teaching. Christ's teaching is the truth about saving righteousness.

Christ's teaching, or Word, is our heritage of the Reformation. God the Father imputes Jesus' righteousness under the law to the sinner through faith alone. This saving righteousness comes to us by God's grace alone and not through our works. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The truth that saves us is Christ's righteousness, his perfect obedience of God's will which is love for God with all of our hearts, souls, and minds, and love for our neighbor as ourselves. Because Jesus was holy, God declares us holy. Jesus' holiness sets us free from the tyranny of the law with its demands to obey it perfectly. It has been kept. We are free from the tyranny of the damnation breaking the law brings. Jesus endured that on the cross. We are free from the fear of a guilty conscience, from the fear of death, and from the accusations Satan brings against us.

The more I try to have saving righteousness by my own efforts at trying to obey God's law, which is impossible and unnecessary as we have seen, the more fear and hopelessness overcomes me. It is like the mockery of that Arbeit macht frei sign, as if endless labor does in itself bring spiritual freedom. It doesn't. Yet my natural reliance on self, my opinion that the law will save me, leads me to continue to labor under the law. The law convicts me of sin. The law works guilt. The law enslaves me with no freedom in sight.

Luther wrote in “Dear Christians One and All Rejoice,” “Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay; death brooded darkly o’er me...My own good works availed me naught, no merit they attaining...my fears increased till sheer despair left naught but death to be my share and hell to be my sentence.” CW 377 The harder we struggle against the chains of the law, the more entangled we become.

Christ’s teaching, he is your Savior and mine, is the truth about saving righteousness. This truth has thrown off the chains of the law. If we remain in this truth, continue to trust Christ’s teaching, we are really free; free from the tyranny of the law, free from the sin, guilt and death our transgression of the law bring.

The Holy Spirit opened Luther’s heart to this truth as Luther studied the Word of God. We are the heirs of that truth as the same Spirit has preserved Christ’s teaching among us by grace alone. Christ’s teaching sets us free for genuine discipleship.

The Jews who did not believe in Jesus had a cloudy recall of history. They had been slaves of many nations. They incorrectly associated their perceived freedom from slavery and Abraham’s blood in their veins as the reasons they were the sons of God with a permanent place in God’s family. Jesus taught them that son ship, discipleship, comes in the freedom from sin. We all are slaves to sin by nature.

It is only Christ’s righteousness that has changed our status to become the sons of God. Through Christ’s righteousness we have freedom from sin’s guilt, power, and condemnation. Our faith alone in Christ’s righteousness makes us permanent members of God’s family, his disciples.

A sign of discipleship is keeping Christ’s teaching. I learned it, “If you continue in my Word, you are really my disciples.” It is characteristic of a disciple of Christ not to despise his Word in preaching and teaching, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

Jesus said in another place that not everyone who calls him Lord will inherit the kingdom of God but the one who does my Father’s will. Obeying Christ’s teaching, holding to his teaching, is the Father’s will for us. We are no longer slaves and not part of his permanent family. We are free indeed, his sons who have a permanent place in his family.

Self-sacrifice and endless labor under God’s law and church law do not make us free. Christ’s sacrifice and his perfect labor under God’s law has freed us free from its tyranny. We go back and forth to our daily labors not in hopelessness under the lie of spiritual freedom through work but under the sign that is our hope: Christ’s righteousness has set us free - so we are free indeed. Amen. <SDGF>