

Absolved Only Through the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

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Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. - Gal. 5:1-3

Last time, we saw that in order to have an abiding place in the church, we need the Lord Jesus Christ as our foundation. There are many who claim to be children of God who have never been born again through that good seed which enlightens, and brings acceptance with God, who then acknowledges us as his children. We must hold fast to the pure doctrine of the gospel if we desire to be truly united to the Lord Jesus Christ. He, as our Head and our Mediator, unites us to God the Father. We have already spoken about the reason why Paul mentions both the servile and the free offspring. He tells us that those who seek justification through their own good deeds are severing themselves from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. For they are binding themselves to perform that which is impossible, that is, to satisfy God by keeping his commandments. Whereas, we are so full of weaknesses that we cannot possibly fulfill the least article of the law, let alone reach the perfection which the law requires. This is why Paul concludes that we must maintain the liberty that was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, he is most certainly referring to the ceremonies here, although we should always return to the original purpose and main goal of the law. For if the law were only concerned with keeping a certain feast day or abstaining from a certain kind of meat, this would not be an issue of such weight as to stir up so many contentions within the church. Yet, Paul never wasted his time dealing with trivial or inconsequential matters. He was concerned with doctrine; for to make other matters obligatory was to exclude multitudes from the hope of salvation. If it is a mortal sin to neglect a certain ritual, I become a transgressor if I fail, and there is no remedy for such a sin. God is my judge and will call me to account; there is no means of redemption. Whilst it is true that we all must observe the law, yet there is a remedy if, on account of our shortcomings, we run to the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, he submitted to the law in order to buy our liberty. He took our curse upon him in order to set us free. So then, if we impose various additional obligations, and say that to do this or that is a sin, our Lord Jesus Christ will not serve as a remedy for such things in the way that I have said. Instead, we will remain under the curse without hope of deliverance. Thus, Paul has good reason to exhort the Galatians to stand fast and not allow themselves to return to servitude. For this, he says, will rob them of a priceless gift, and they will fall from the grace of God and be separated from the Lord Jesus Christ, the only source of salvation and eternal happiness.

Now, in order to experience the nature and qualities of this gift, we must learn to hide ourselves in God. Let me give an example here. If certain laws and obligations are placed upon us by men, they do not detract from our liberty before God. Whatever belongs to law and order, and is either forbidden or commanded, must be obeyed for the sake of the common good. If a certain duty is required, we ought to do it, thereby serving one another in the community. Notice, therefore, that the things which pertain to law and order require that we interact in a united and harmonious way, having such a strong bond that we will serve our neighbours, and not selfishly look after our own interests. However, when it comes to spiritual liberty, we need to withdraw from the crowd in order to experience its nature and effects. I say that each one of us must come before God personally, for one day we shall give account before our heavenly judge. We are to examine ourselves within and ask, how am I to present myself before the judgment seat of God? If my life is examined according to the law,

woe is me! I am guilty of an infinite number of offences, that even if there were a million deaths, it would be insufficient to pay for the sins I have committed. Yet, God desires to show me his favour, and receive me in mercy in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. When I approach him, therefore, I can come with my head held high, having been acquitted and absolved through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who paid for my sin and gave me full deliverance. This is the first thing, the way in which I must serve God. Of course, I must dedicate my life to him, but how do I begin? For I cannot bring him the perfection that he requires, nor even the hundredth part of it! Well, God bears with me, and still accepts and approves that which is imperfect and weak, and even that which is mixed with sin. Why? Because he accepts me in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as one of his own children. This, I say, is how we are to come before God if we wish to know and experience the fruit of this liberty of which Paul speaks.

When Paul says, 'be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage', he shows that before we had faith in the gospel and understood the significance of the sufferings and death of the Son of God, we were held tightly bound as prisoners and did not enjoy any freedom. Indeed, if Jesus Christ had not intervened and become the Mediator between God the Father and man, our souls would still be tormented and afflicted. For there is not one of us who does not recognise that he is more than guilty, and we would have remained in this condition, drowned in despair, had we not been rescued by the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sorrow would have been ours if we never knew how merciful God would be on us; how he would bestow peace to us, and the boldness to call upon him because Jesus Christ has gone before us. On the other hand, if we do not know that God has truly received us, and is satisfied with the obedience that we seek to render to him (though with much weakness), then we are bound by a second rope, which will strangle us. This is the case with all unbelievers. Now the gospel has shown that God loves us, and that he freely accepts us as his children in his goodness. Therefore, Paul warns us not to be trampled upon by men in their tyranny, but to be delivered from the rigorous obligations of the law which force us into slavery. We are to uphold our privileged position, now that Jesus Christ has set us free.

Let us now consider the reason that he gives: 'Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.' This statement, which tells us that circumcision can cut men off from any share in the salvation purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ, is very harsh. However, we must remember, first of all, that when Paul speaks of circumcision here, he is not referring to the act itself, but to its purpose. The seducers that had infiltrated the Galatians and corrupted the purity of the gospel wanted them to believe that a person had to be circumcised in order to keep the law. Paul stops here, and says that if we are being forced and obliged to perform this task for God and to enter into this covenant with him, Jesus Christ will not profit us. This is well worthy of our attention. Today, we say that it is hellish tyranny to command people to obey certain rules on the grounds that their failure is a mortal sin! Likewise, it is tyranny to forbid something simply because it does not please men. Someone ordained that we should keep Lent, and another, that we should confess all of our sins once a year. Now if we dispute this, the Papists, as I have said, will be thrown into a mad rage, without considering the reasons why we have been stirred up to insist upon this view. Why? Because they look no further than the external act. Yet, we must look more deeply. The Papists command that we obey, on pain of committing a mortal sin, making us think that we are obliged to do it to be acceptable to God; we have entered into a covenant with him based upon doing our duty. Whoever has fulfilled his duty has made God his debtor, according to the devilish doctrines which abound in Popery. We can only obtain grace by our merits, and the memory of our sins and iniquities can be wiped out by making our own satisfaction for sin and thereby appeasing God's wrath. We see, therefore, that if we can obtain our own pardon, Jesus Christ is made of no value and cannot profit us at all. Why? Because Jesus Christ is not our righteousness if we do not seek remission of our sins through the sacrifice of his death. We need to be sure that God is our Father, and that we can call upon him with a peaceful conscience, having been adopted through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, it is true that the seducers who deceived the Galatians still desired Jesus Christ to be known as the Saviour of the world. They believed both the law and the gospel, so they upheld all the titles that belonged to Jesus Christ. However, they believed that part of our salvation has to be merited, as a means of appeasing God. Thus, Jesus Christ simply supplied that which was lacking. But this leaves poor souls with troubled consciences still. The same applies today in Popery. The Pope, with all the scum of his clergy, differs nothing from the seducers that Paul is arguing against here, except, perhaps, that they used the authority of the law of Moses to push forward their own notions and make them acceptable. The people that Paul criticises here were arguing that they must observe the rite of circumcision. They said it was necessary for everyone to be circumcised. Why? In order to be guiltless before God; that, having done their duty, they may be acceptable to him. What, then, is the role of Jesus Christ? He acts as a kind of supplement; they are not saying that he has no purpose, but that he supplies the difference, after men have acquitted and absolved themselves, and only if they need extra help! Such is the speech of the seducers who opposed Paul. And what of the Pope? Instead of the ceremonial law of Moses, he says that we must obey what he ordains, and what his councils determine, or decisions of this person or that. He makes such directives compulsory, on pain of committing a mortal sin. If we have offended God, he says we can redeem ourselves through penances, rather than by doing what God has commanded. His idea of penance is not to fulfill that which has been commanded in the law, but to do even more than is required; this is how we are acquitted in God's sight and made acceptable to him. We can see, therefore, that the Pope has retained the same devilish principle that these people sought to introduce. Indeed, his sin is even worse, because instead of using the law of Moses for his authority, he bases it upon his own inventions, forged in his own mind!

Paul opposes all this, and says that Christ shall profit them nothing if they seek such a covenant with God. Why? Because it is as if they are dividing Christ, and only attributing to him half of that which is wholly his own. He is our righteousness and he is our peace (1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:14). What does this word 'righteousness' imply? It means that God can freely accept us through the Lord Jesus Christ. If we say that we can please God by our merits, and that Jesus Christ simply completes that which we lack, are we not tearing him in two, and dismembering him as far as is in our power? We are not to do such a thing, nor allow others to do so. Furthermore, our Lord Jesus Christ has paid for our sins, and there is no other means of being reconciled to God than the knowledge that he has delivered and rescued us from the penalty of eternal death. If we think that we can purchase our own redemption through our own merits, and believe that the rest will come from him, as a small addition, we are openly mocking him, which is abominable. We see why Paul says that Jesus Christ will not profit in such circumstances; he wants men to stop deceiving themselves by creating a Jesus Christ who only partially fulfils his office. No; we must receive him as he is revealed to us by God the Father. He has been given to us so that we might not trust in anything else, but have recourse to him alone. We are to be content to have him as our Head, and we must serve God the Father with all that we have, knowing that although it amounts to nothing, yet he is pleased with it through our adoption in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this which makes us ourselves and all our works acceptable to God. Ourselves, I say, though we are worthless, and our works, though they are vain. God is pleased with them because he does not take account of what we are, or of what we have done, nor of the quality or quantity of our works. He is interested in the fact that we have come to him, as members of the body of his only Son, leaning entirely upon the sacrifice by which he bought us.

This is why Paul adds, for the greater confirmation of the same, 'I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.' If we wish to justify ourselves in this way, he says, Christ will not profit us. We have here a very straightforward and articulate statement of what Paul said earlier, and we must pay attention to it, for it is difficult to persuade people that Christ is of no value at all if they seek to make use of him only in part. For although the Turks and pagans have not even known Jesus Christ, they have a similar view to the Papists, and we will find much conformity between them. For there have never been any pagan people in this world who have

believed that we cannot please God. They have always boasted about their good deeds and thought that their salvation depended upon them. Pagans have, therefore, always believed that they can obtain grace and merit favour in God's sight. Hence, they have offered sacrifices to him, unaware that these are a figure of the Lord Jesus Christ, hoping to bring God a propitiation. This, also, was done by the Jews, having defiled and corrupted the true significance of the law. The Papists follow suit today. They are certain that God accepts what they do, and is somehow indebted to them. They enter into a covenant with him whereby he is compelled to accept what they do, though they have failed him. (For on the one hand, they readily accept that they cannot achieve everything perfectly—although, on the other hand, they claim that they can accomplish more than God has required of them, and that this serves as payment!) Now, because it is difficult to persuade men that Jesus Christ cannot serve as part-payment, we must give all the more attention to this passage, where Paul tells us that whoever is circumcised is a debtor to perform the whole law.

Firstly, when Paul speaks of circumcision, he is not referring to that which was instituted by God. Why, indeed, did he ask this of Abraham? It was a seal of the righteousness that comes through faith, as Paul himself says in the fourth chapter to the Romans (Rom. 4:11). When Abraham was circumcised, it did not make him a debtor to keep the whole law: on the contrary, it was to obtain remission of his sins, and to assure him that God accepted him as one of his children in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, circumcision set our father Abraham free! Why did he do it? Because it was a sacrament that reminded him of the free mercy of God. Those with whom Paul argues here took circumcision as a meritorious work, hoping to obtain God's favour by it. They saw it as a covenant which said, 'I have declared my allegiance to you by doing this, and now I seek a reward'. If we enter such a covenant with God, then we are debtors to keep the whole law. In other words, Paul is saying that we cannot bargain with God. Men must not imagine that they can please God in part, and that he is, therefore, obligated to them. He is not bound to allow them into his paradise because they have done this or that. No, no, says Paul, we must reach heaven by very different means; we are not to have this notion of a mutual covenant with God, which makes him obligated to grant us eternal life in return for compulsory observation of the law. If this is what we have believed, then we are debtors to keep the whole law.

In brief, Paul contends here with the Satanic doctrine which holds sway in Popery today. They speak of partial righteousness, which means that part of it proceeds from the grace of God, whilst the other portion is supplied by meritorious works. How could this be? After all, it is quite obvious that there has never been a man alive in this world who has fulfilled the whole law of God. Experience proves this so clearly! Since the Papists realise the truth of this, it being most evident, as I say, that no man can keep all of the law, they have the effrontery to say, 'Oh, we do not believe that a person can be completely righteous in every way, and therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness and our Redeemer in part. The rest we merit through our good deeds!' Shame, shame, says Paul. If you imagine that you have an agreement with God whereby you have merited something from him, and deserve a reward because you have placed him in your debt; if, I say, you are so mercenary as to say, 'I have done this, now you must do that', you have made yourself a debtor to do the whole law. These are foolish notions; men are deceiving themselves by thinking that God accepts all that they do, yet will ignore all that they have omitted to do. For example, a man owes a hundred pounds, and has to pay it back. Yet, he thinks his creditor ought to be content if he gives him four pounds, and says, 'Here. Take this as payment'. Then he brings him another six, then ten. Finally, after much ado, he has paid him a third or a quarter of the sum owed. Now, if he believed that he had acquitted himself of the debt by doing this, would it not amount to wicked ingratitude? His friend had opened his purse to help him at a time of need, and did not spare anything in order to support him. Yet, he wants to be acquitted of the debt because he has given back I know not what, saying 'Take this as payment', when he has not even paid a quarter of the total amount. We can see that this would be ridiculous. What, then, of those who want to enter into account with God by their merits? For God has said, and Paul has already quoted this for us, that whoever does not keep all the things that are written in the law is accursed.

What, then, are our obligations under the law? To observe it perfectly. And who is able to accomplish this? There is not one who can fulfill even a single requirement to perfection. Yet, what do these hypocrites do, who believe they can be worthy through their own works? They do this and that, hoping to be righteous in part at least. God will accept none of it. He will never retract the following statement, which he made with his own mouth, 'Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them' (Deut. 27:26). This is why Paul insists here that whoever is circumcised is a debtor to keep the whole law. It is as if he were saying, 'Do not deceive yourselves any longer. God does not have two paths. He has declared in the law that whoever does not perfectly fulfill it is accursed.' There is not one who has succeeded, so that leaves us all under this curse. There is but one remedy, and that is to come to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is wrong to believe in the partial value of Jesus Christ, whilst holding on to I know not what of our own. We ought, rather, to confess that we are under the curse until our Lord Jesus Christ has freed us and we have sought all that we need in him. We need to confess that all our works are of no value, and that they stink in the eyes of God, until he owns us as his children, and enables us to walk in liberty of conscience, knowing that our sins are forgiven by virtue of the pardon that he obtained for us. Now, God no longer imputes our sins and iniquities to us, because he sees us as we are in the person of his only Son.

This is how Paul sets out to prove what he said earlier, that Jesus Christ is of no profit to those who have been circumcised. Why? Because, if they seek salvation through works, they must achieve all that God requires, and not bits and pieces (as they say). They must accomplish the whole law, without omitting anything. Who is able to do this? If we were to select the most holy and perfect person that we could find, he could not even perform a hundredth part of that which has been commanded. Thus, men are bereft of any hope of salvation unless they come emptied of all their 'merits' and fully lean on the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that they cannot be justified by him or by his grace unless they have renounced all those things in which they once trusted.

Furthermore, when Paul speaks of circumcision here, he means the erroneous view of it spread by these seducers, imagining that they were winning God's favour and fulfilling the law. Similarly today, all who keep the papal ordinances are overturning the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am not saying that a man will be condemned for refusing to eat meat on Fridays or on fast days; yet, if he abstains from meat out of superstition, and believes he is meriting God's favour by so doing, then he is rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. He was given to us as our Advocate, in order to reconcile us to God the Father. He has set us free so that we have no need of human traditions. Many keep the papal ordinances because they believe it is a mortal sin to eat meat on a certain day, and that, by abstaining, they deserve God's mercy because they have satisfied him. They even think that they are honouring Jesus Christ when they make confession, or do this or that! They believe that the door of heaven will remain closed to them unless they open it by confession, thinking that, by this means, they can appease God. Thus, by believing these things, they make themselves debtors (as I have said), and reject the grace obtained for them by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us now apply this doctrine to our profit. In the first place, we know that God has declared in the gospel that whenever we come to him (unless we are vexed and perturbed, like reeds shaking in the wind), we are to call upon him freely and openly as our Father, who has adopted us as his children. Secondly, the only way we can be pleasing to him is through having our sins forgiven. How? Jesus Christ has fully paid the price, and given us complete pardon. However, we know that this does not mean that we are to remove our bridles and please ourselves, like wild animals that cannot be tamed by God. No, rather, we must come to him freely, willing to obey him. We need the assurance that he accepts us as his children and supports us so compassionately that he approves of what we do, though it is worthless, because of the fatherly love he bears us. If we do not have this assurance, the thought of serving God will make us grind our teeth. If, however, we are persuaded that God looks upon us favourably; if, though we are weak and can do nothing worthy of his approval, he accepts us in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we will surely be filled with courage. We will be like a ship's

sail that has been stretched and filled by the breeze! Thus, our hearts will run to obey him, like a ship driven along by its sail, when we know that God delights in us and accepts our works, not wanting us to be compelled into servitude. He is happy for us to be his children, and that we desire to obey him. Knowing this, we can serve our God with all the more zeal. With his grace as our foundation, we are so filled with his joy that we can offer the sacrifice of praise. Likewise, having sought him in prayer, we can know that he will answer us and, in return, we can thank him for the priceless gifts that he communicates to us every day.

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and praying that it would please him to make us more conscious of them, so that we are truly humbled, and give ourselves wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ. Having come to him, may we persevere in the faith of the gospel, without drawing back in any way whatever. May he support us in our infirmity, when we are touched with our need for true repentance. May we tremble and groan before him, until the day that he delivers us from this mortal body, which, like a prison, confines us in bondage to sin. Thus, we all say, Almighty God, and our heavenly Father, etc

Marked up by Lance George Marshall