

Faith working itself out in love

Galatians 5:6

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Martin Luther is known for the role that he played in the Protestant Reformation back in the 1500s. God used him and others to free many from the tyranny of “works-based” religion and to introduce them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the Word of God. Luther proclaimed a salvation of grace through faith that had eluded him for so long.

Early in Luther’s adult life, even after Luther’s close encounter with a lightning strike and his vow to follow God, his life was hounded by a rigid legalism that brought nothing but guilt and fear. He entered the strictest monastery that he could find with the belief that this would grant him a life of peace, freeing him from God’s judgment that he constantly feared. He gave his full energies to monastic life. He was obsessive, legalistic, unrelenting about how he went about his monastic chores and disciplines. His drastic devotion to prayers, fasting, sleeping without blankets, and punishing himself, nearly ended his life.

“I tortured myself . . . and I inflicted upon myself such pains as I would never inflict again . . . if it had lasted much longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, praying, reading, and the other labors.”¹

But why did Luther do this to himself? He knew how sinful he was. He had been trained as a lawyer and he knew the meaning of judgment against even the smallest of infractions. Luther often spent hours of the day in confession. One of his mentors even once said, “If you’re going to confess so much, at least do something worth confessing?”²

Luther even made a trip to Rome, believing that this pilgrimage to the “holy city” might somehow bring him forgiveness and peace, but instead he found nothing but sin amongst the priests, and empty rituals that brought no relief. On his return home Luther’s mentor asked why he could not understand the love

¹ Stephen J. Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 29.

² Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 65.

of God. “Love God?” Luther replied, “I can’t love God, I hate Him.”³ Eventually Luther was sent away to be a theology professor. It was then as he taught Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews that he began to discover the salvation of Christ through faith.

Luther longed to be right with God, but even in the midst of being an almost perfect monk he had no security or peace that his rigid legalism would be enough to please God. It was then that he encountered Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 with the words, *“the just will live by faith”*. Salvation does not come through trusting in one’s own good works. Salvation comes through having faith in Jesus Christ. Our righteousness is in reality the righteousness of Christ. As Christ took upon Himself the sinfulness of man, so shall we take upon ourselves the righteousness of Christ.

As one reads in Ephesians 2:8-9, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

Luther continued to serve God with all his energy and determination, but the burden and the fear of the law no longer motivated him. His passion was now propelled by love that He received from Christ. Everything that God would do through Martin Luther’s life would be trace back to this love relationship that He found in Christ. The law had been exchanged for love.

Luther had struggled with the same issues that the Apostle Paul had wrestled with back in the first century.

Saul’s background of strict Judaism had driven him to legalism and hatred. As a Pharisee, law had been his motivation, but once He put his faith in Christ the law was replaced by love. This love proved to be more valuable than life itself. For sharing the love of Christ, Paul willingly endured being whipped, beaten, and almost stoned to death. He was imprisoned, unjustly, numerous times and shipwrecked more than once. There were days without sleep, shelter, or food for the sake of Christ, but yet from a Roman prison cell he was able to write, *“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”* (Philippians 4:11). Once Paul understood the greatness of the love of God, Paul’s life was dramatically changed. He went from arresting and persecuting Christians to becoming a leader of Christians. Because of love He was willing to lay down his life for the glory of God and the salvation of others.

A similar struggle between law and love was also happening in the midst of the churches of Galatia. Many of the Galatians had put their faith in Jesus Christ and had been born again (John 3). They later had been presented a false gospel that demanded not just belief in Christ, but also good works to earn salvation. It left them confused. Which was the true way to be made right with God? Was it through faith as one trusted in Christ or was it through works as one trusted in themselves?

These Jewish false teachers demanded that the Galatians be circumcised to become Jewish so that they could be accepted by God, but Paul argued that if one put his trust in physical good works they were not trusting in Christ and were not born again at all.

³ Nate Picowicz, *Why We’re Protestant: An Introduction to the Five Solas of the Reformation* (Entreating Favor, 2017), 284.

Circumcision was an outward sign that one was set apart for God. It set the Jews apart from their neighboring nations. It was to be an outward symbol of being set apart for God that pointed to a heart that was set apart for God. Because of this, if a person had been physically circumcised but their heart was not set apart for God, the physical circumcision was meaningless. On the other hand, if one's heart was "circumcised" and set apart for God and he had not been physically circumcised, he was still right with God. Ultimately, the focus was on the heart that was set apart for God not the physical circumcision.

Being circumcised or trying to do good deeds cannot make one right with God. Only faith in Christ can do that. That was Paul's argument with these false teachers. Do not trust in the law and your own obedience for salvation. It is impossible to be holy on our own. Trust in Christ.

In Galatians 5:6 Paul continues this thought with these words, *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."*

When, through faith, we encounter the love and mercy of God it compels us to live holy lives and love others as we have been loved. We no longer seek to be righteous out of fear, but out of love. The "have to" has now been changed to "want to." As we delight ourselves in the Lord He changes the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). As we see in Ezekiel 36:26-27, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes."*

Our relationship with Christ is not governed by law and guilt. Scripture describes a gracious relationship with God. *"God's kindness leads you to repentance"* (Romans 2:4). *"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome"* (1 John. 5:3).

Through faith in Christ we are made right with God. The spirit of Christ joins with our spirit and gives us a heart that loves God, and turns our affections and desires towards the things of God. When we truly come to understand the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of God's love for us in Christ, our own hearts can do nothing but burst forth with gratitude and the holy desire to serve and honor Him forever.

Love in the believer is the product of Christ in the believer. We do not produce the love in our lives. As believers in Christ our love for God, for holiness, and for other believers, is the love of Christ in us. For us to love rightly we must have Christ in our lives. 2 Peter 1:3 describes it in this way, *"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence."*

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:18-19).

As we come to know the love of Christ there is no more fear of judgment or condemnation. We now have everlasting love. Even in our failings we are secure, covered by the righteousness of Christ, motivated by love.

We have been made acceptable in God's sight because of what Christ has done for us. We wear the righteousness of Christ. If we are truly in the faith and the Spirit of Christ is in us, then we are secured in our salvation.

In light of this transaction from law to love, we will consider three questions.

1- So, my salvation does not depend on how good or bad my life has been?

Correct. *"Without faith it is impossible to please God"* (Hebrews 11:6). For even our best of deeds, without God, are seen as nothing more than filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23).

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

At the same time, there is no sin that is too bad to be forgiven. *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 6:23). *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

2- So, once I am a believer, even if I sin, I can never lose my salvation?

Although the "bad news" of our sin condemned us, it shows us that our salvation did not depend on us. It was accomplished by Christ, our Savior. If we, in the midst of our sinfulness, had been able to bring about our own salvation, then our salvation would be "built on the sand" and would exist in a very feeble state. But our salvation was brought about by Christ. In His words, *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand"* (John 10:28). His hands are the only ones who are able to draw us into salvation, and because of this we are now held securely throughout this lifetime and into eternity.

Jonathan Edwards, in his book, *A Treatise on Religious Affections*, writes of how those who have been born again in Christ Jesus will experience a change of desire and affections. They will have a desire for holiness, the things of God and for God's people.

Edwards said that, *"Where true conversion takes place there is a new nature, there is a new inner man. And that new inner man has a driving passion for holiness. He is not always what he should be, he doesn't always say what he should say, doesn't always think what he should think, but his passion is toward holiness."*

As we look at scripture we see that even in the midst of a believer's sin they have a desire for holiness. Followers of Christ will sin, but their sin will be followed by conviction and discipline as God brings His children more and more into obedience of Christ. Those who continue in sin without conviction or discipline from the Father show that they were never truly in the faith. One who is truly in Christ, though guilty of sin, will never lose their salvation. Those who continue in sin without any sign of remorse or holy affections were never in the faith, regardless of how religious they may be.

3- So, what if I do not love God and still love the world?

John 2:15-16 answers this question for us. *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world."*

If one has no desire for holiness or for the things of God, then they are simply not born again. They are not a true follower of Christ. As Christ spoke of in Matthew 13, perhaps they have been exposed to Christ and appreciated Him for a moment or for a while, but when the pressures and temptations of the world come it is revealed that their true love was still for the world and not for Christ.

A love for holiness, the things of God, and a love for God's people will be indicators that one is truly in the faith. As seen in 1 John 3, *"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers."*

Once again looking to Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise on Religious Affections*, we read these thoughts on the importance of the love for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ:

"All of a sudden people who had no affection for, no interest in, people you saw as strangers, as odd, as outside your social structure, outside your interest, people you virtually wanted nothing to do with because you couldn't connect, all of a sudden you find yourself loving those people. This is the change, the alteration of the heart. This is part of the new affection that you have, that affection for the people of God. And you love them not just in word, that is it's just not talk, it's just not with the tongue, it's not a hypocritical superficial love, but it's a love that finds expression in what you do."

All of this talk of new desires and affections is an expression of a heart that has been supernaturally turned from law to love. We are no longer motivated by fear and guilt or even a conscience that condemns us. We have been forgiven. We are now loved with an everlasting love. The love of Christ is now in us. We have been given new affections and desires for Christ, His people, His glory and the salvation of the lost. We are now free to love as Christ loves us. In that we find freedom, purpose and are compelled to righteous living for the sake of others. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

If you are not in the faith, repent and believe in Jesus, today. He longs to draw you near to Himself.

If you are in the faith, nurture the Spirit of Christ, His spirit of love, which lives within you. Read the Bible. Pray often. Spend time with other believers. Serve others in need. That the love of Christ may thrive in your life.

We have been released from the law and are now free to live in love. Blessings to us all, in Christ Jesus.