

We love New Ulm and greater New Ulm. We have great people, churches, parks, business, eateries, the College of Ministry for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, tradespeople, good hospital, a farm feel to the area, and so much more. Something that catches the visitor to New Ulm by surprise is when you go out to eat in a few of the local area places, you are met with the sign "Cash only." They don't accept credit card or debit card. It won't work. And when the ATM is out of order, it means they don't eat. Offering \$2 cash and your debit card won't work. The whole amount is needed in the only currency allowed – Cash. Some people are surprised, but it doesn't change the fact that it's "Cash Only."

The apostle Paul wrote a pointed letter to the Christians in Galatia because there were some false teachers who were leading them to believe that they would get to heaven by trusting in Jesus for some of their salvation and depending on their fulfillment of God's laws for the rest of it. But Paul warns them: it won't work. You won't get into heaven. It's Jesus Only. Any attempted combinations will be rejected. It's Jesus Only. And thank God that's how it is, and that is what we get to proclaim.

Stand Firm! Christ Has Set You Free. You Are Free.

"It 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. 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 the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." When we honor members of our armed forces, we remember that freedom comes at a high cost. Freedom isn't free. And the freedom Paul speaks of here in Christ was not free either. Our freedom as Christians came at a high cost – Jesus, the Son of God, perfectly fulfilled the impossible requirements of the law of God in action and in heart. Jesus innocently suffered a gruesome death and hell as substitute for every sinner. Jesus rose physically from the grave defeating death. Freedom came at a high cost to the Son of God.

The freedom he won for us is the freedom of knowing that full forgiveness, eternal life in heaven, and God's loving approval is ours as a free gift from God given to us by faith alone in the merit of Christ Jesus our Lord. We are freed from our sin, and it's control. We are freed from the dark dominion of the devil. We are freed in our consciences from thinking that God's love, approval, and heaven are earned by our performance of the law, or are lost forever because we have failed. It's Jesus only. And because of that it's certain. **Stand Firm! Christ Has Set You Free.**

How do we use this freedom? Some might think, "Do whatever sin you want!" "Ignore what God says!" One day in 8th grade we thought it would be fun to play a game of basketball without rules. You could do anything you wanted. This did not turn out to be fun. People got hurt. There were no fouls so people were shoving and pushing and getting trampled. There were no violations so people ran with the ball and you thought you were seeing rugby on the hard tile floor of Good Shepherd's in West Allis. It wasn't freedom. It was a new kind of slavery and people got hurt. Paul rebukes this idea from a spiritual standpoint in another place in that we aren't freed to sin and use grace as license to sin.

What are we freed for then? God's law is good and a delight – not as a means of salvation, but as a way for forgiven people, made righteous by Christ's merit and assured of heaven, live their lives to truly honor God and serve our neighbor. We are freed from sin for the service of righteousness.

I try to be gentle for the most part with my kids. I don't always accomplish this, but I try not to fly off the handle. But I do get loud and sharp when one of them is in danger, doing something that could harm them or another – whether it's heading for the street to chase a ball and not looking for cars, or getting close to a cliff. I yell for their protection. Paul does the same, *"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 the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace."*

In three different ways Paul warns them. If you picture a baby boy and their pee pee, or penis, circumcision is the cutting off of a little piece flesh around the tip. For the Old Testament Jew this was symbolic for entering into a

covenant relationship with God under his law. Circumcision didn't matter anymore for the Christian who knew that Christ fulfilled the law and the Law of Moses perfectly. You could be circumcised or not circumcised. But the believers in Galatia were being taught and tempted to get circumcised as a way to earn God's favor or fulfill the law. So, it would be Jesus + their works that they relied on. Paul yells. If you do that, and trust in your works in any way – *“Christ will be of no value to you at all.”* If you do that, and trust in your works in any way – *“you are obligated to obey the whole law.”* No one fulfilled the law perfectly in the Old Testament. You won't do better. They would all have been lost if it weren't for the promised coming Savior who fulfilled the law perfectly in their place. They were saved by faith too. Paul says, If you do that, and trust in your works in any way or depend on them for your forgiveness or God's approval, *“you have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace.”* When it comes to my salvation – Jesus + Nothing = Everything. Jesus + my work or fulfillment of any law = fallen from grace. I lose Christ. I lose everything.

Imagine walking into the courtroom of God to face him. You can take Jesus' hand and walk in. Or you can hold on to all your supposed works and walk in to face God. You can't do both. One way = eternal salvation. The other = fallen from grace.

This terrifies me because so often our sinful natures think we can fulfill God's law enough. We can puff up and feel we should be rewarded by God for coming to church, doing his work, giving to him, etc. We might even start to look down on others we feel are mispending their time or their talents with poor priorities. We start to feel some of our salvation depends on me. We bloat with hypocritical puff. This usually flies under our radar, but we see it in the times where our conscience wakes up to our sin, our failures to keep God's law, the times we succumbed to temptation, chickened out again in keeping God's law. We sweat and lay in fear wondering if God could be merciful to a sinner such as me or am I destined for hell because I cannot get it right? What Paul says is meant as a warning to stop the nonsense of thinking the law is a way for your to be righteous, or for your reward, and that Christ cannot forgive you for your sins.

Paul shouts, **“Stand Firm.”** That isn't freedom – it's a trap. Jesus + works won't get you in. The freedom you have been given in the righteousness Christ has given to you, use to walk in step with his Word, trusting him for forgiveness, following his commands with joy not to earn anything, nor in fear of possible misstep. You are an heir of his kingdom. Live for him – free to be a slave of Christ. Jesus + Nothing = Everything.

Christ is the fulfiller of the law for me and for you, and he has given us his righteousness. Martin Luther rightly said of Jesus, *“You are my righteousness, I am your sin.”* Shortly before Caesar Augustus issued his decree an angel of the Lord told Joseph about the baby, *“you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:21). Jesus Only. He is your only Savior. You are not your savior in any way. We are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ, not by works.

“For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” We wait eagerly for the Lord to return, to bring us home. Like children waiting the painful days of December 21,22,23 until the day they can open the presents their parents have laid out for them, we eagerly await by faith the realization of what God has in store. As you wait, bring God glory in all you do. Love your neighbor as yourself and serve. Share this great freedom and what it means. Delight in God's commands not because you earn anything by them or to ease your conscience. Delight in them because our Father who has given us life and salvation wants them for us, and it is a way we can say Thank You! Should we go against them, we need to be rebuked and led back to Christ. He did not set us free to sin. He set us free from sin, forgiven to live for him.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Martin Luther wrote, *“For it is human freedom when laws are changed without effecting a change in men, but it is Christian freedom when men are changed without changing the law”* (LW 27:326). One person said it well – *“We do good works because we are saved, not to be saved.”* Paul said, *“For it is by grace we have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Next time you go to a cash only place, bring cash! And remember that your salvation is Jesus Only, not anything you do or could do. He has redeemed you, purchased you, won you. **You are Free.** Use that Freedom to live for him, to delight to do his will until the day you get to thank him face to face. **Stand Firm. Christ Has Set You Free. You Are Free.** Amen.