

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Reformation Festival, November 2, 2008

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HYMNS: 353 (262:1) 489, 354, 262:4

LESSONS: Habakkuk 2:1-4; Galatians 1:3-12; Luke 12:49-53

TEXT: Galatians 6:11-16

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

Dear Friends in Christ,

Four hundred and ninety-one years ago on October 31st, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The 95 theses were statements directed against the errors of the Roman Catholic church, especially the error of selling indulgences (letters of pardon). At that time, under Pope Leo X, the people were taught to believe that they could buy forgiveness of sins with money. Instead of trusting in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness, they trusted in the letters of pardon. In the 32nd thesis Luther wrote, *"Those who believe that through letters of pardon they may be sure of their salvation will go to hell, together with their teachers."* With these 95 theses Luther began the work which resulted in cleansing the Church and restoring the pure Gospel of Christ.

How should we today observe this festival? Surely no better way could be found to do this than to exhort one another as Christians to be faithful to the Word of God. That means not only that our teaching and preaching must be true to the Bible, but that our whole life be centered in Christ Crucified, and that we give all glory to God for our soul's salvation.

Our sermon text for today will help us to do this. From it we want to learn about

ST. PAUL'S LOVING CONCERN FOR BELIEVERS IN CHRIST.

- 1. He reveals the hypocrisy of false teachers who glory in themselves and try to avoid persecution;**
- 2. He gives an example to follow in glorying only in the cross of Christ; and,**
- 3. He teaches them that only in Christ can we have a right relation with God and the resulting peace and mercy.**

In his entire letter to the Galatian believers Paul showed his loving concern for them in not wanting them to fall away from the true faith of trusting in Christ as their Savior. He was concerned about them because there were false teachers called Judaizers who were troubling them. He shows his concern for them also when he says in our text: *"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"* Paul usually dictated his epistles to someone who would do the writing. But this Epistle to the Galatians Paul wrote himself and with large letters. This showed his favor and respect for them.

Paul described the false teachers, the Judaizers: *"Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised."* The false teachers insisted that the Galatian believers should be circumcised. Beginning with Abraham God had commanded all males in Israel to be circumcised. This was a part of the Old Testament Covenant of the Law. It was a commandment of what we call the Ceremonial Law, and it was intended for the Old Testament times. It had no force after Christ came and completed his work of redemption. So the false teachers had no right to insist that the believers in Christ in the New Testament times should be circumcised.

Paul in our text tells why the false teachers insisted that the believers in Christ be circumcised. ***"The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh."*** These false teachers were not concerned about keeping the law. They were not spiritually minded so that God's Law would mean that much to them. For one thing, they were interested in gaining more followers. Above all, they wanted to avoid being persecuted. The Jews persecuted those who followed Christ. They would not bother anyone or persecute them if they knew they had been circumcised. So the false teachers used this hypocritical method to avoid being named as believers in the cross of Christ and then also to avoid being persecuted as public confessors of Christ. The Apostle Paul saw through the hypocrisy of the false teachers who were troubling the Galatian believers.

We have church leaders in our day who gain a large following and seek to gain publicity for themselves. Hundreds and thousands of people follow these church leaders and support them with their offerings. In this way expensive television programs can be supported and the false teachers can parade before the people dressed in expensive clothing and make a name for themselves. It is characteristic of such religious leaders that they want to gain a large following and make a big name for themselves. The temptation to follow such religious leaders is great. But to do so only satisfies our own vanity and our own desire to be a part of the great majority. The Bible says, ***"A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor,"*** Proverbs 29:23. It also hinders our salvation because we are being taught false teachings. Our Lord tells us, ***"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves,"*** Matthew 7:15.

The Apostle Paul gives the Galatian believers **an example to follow in glorying only in the cross of Christ.**

2.

He said, ***"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*** Paul had a different attitude toward his work as a minister of the Gospel than the false teachers. They were self-seeking men, filled with vanity and pride. The farthest thing from Paul's mind was that the preaching of the Gospel should serve his own selfish interests. The only thing he would boast about was the cross of Christ. When Paul speaks about the cross of Christ, he, of course, has reference to the Gospel truth that Christ was crucified. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God was put on trial, falsely accused by the leaders of the Jews. ***"Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him, and said, 'Prophecy to us, Christ, Who hit you?'"*** Matthew 26:67-68. Then He was nailed to a cross, he shed his blood, and he died. This was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy made 700 years before Jesus was born. ***"He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken,"*** Isaiah 53:8b. In this way Jesus atoned for our sins. He paid for them with his own life. John wrote about ***"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One": "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,"*** 1 John 2:1-2. As our Divine Substitute Jesus suffered in our place and paid all our debt of sin in full.

Because Paul believed this concerning the cross of Christ, he could successfully overcome the temptations of the sinful world, and win the victory over his own sinful nature. Paul's sinful love for the world, its honors and its pleasures, before his conversion, was completely changed. Though he was still **in** the world, his way of thinking and entire manner of living was no longer **of** the world. Paul was not thinking of how great he could become in this world and lord it over others in his ministry. He was not in the ministry for his own profit. Nor was Paul merely trying to change the world to make it a better place in which to live. His work was only this, to preach the Gospel of Christ crucified so that the Holy Spirit could work faith in the hearts of those who heard the Gospel. ***"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ,"*** Romans 10:17.

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All preachers today could certainly profit by following the example of Paul in their work. All who want to proclaim the Gospel should learn from the Apostle Paul. This is how he introduced himself in his Epistle to the Romans: *"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,"* Romans 1:1. This is what he told the believers at Corinth, *"We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake,"* 2 Corinthians 4:5. To the Galatian believers Paul wrote, *"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ,"* Galatians 1:10. If preachers of the Gospel today want to properly observe the Reformation Festival, they should learn from St. Paul how to serve the Lord and not be men-pleasers. For this is also the same humble attitude Dr. Martin Luther had in his work of the reformation.

In our text Paul shows his loving concern for believers in Christ as **he teaches them that only in Christ can we have a right relation with God and have resulting peace and mercy.**

3.

Paul writes, *"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation."* A man, who is a Jew by birth or religion, cannot for that reason claim to have a right relationship with God. Nor can a Gentile because he is not a Jew claim to have a right relationship with God. Only in Christ the Savior can any person claim to be a child of God. Paul wrote to the Galatians earlier in the book: *"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,"* Galatians 3:26. One's physical birth or nationality does not establish a right relationship with God. What is needed is a spiritual regeneration, a new birth in Christ. Jesus instituted Holy Baptism as a means of grace so that even little infants could be born again and come to faith in Jesus. In general, before a person can have a right relationship with God, he must hear the Gospel. It is through the powerful Gospel Word that a person is brought to faith in Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit. Then he can believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only way in which we can have a right relationship with God. Everything centers around Christ. John writes, *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,"* 1 John 5:1. Again John writes, *"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life,"* 1 John 5:11-12.

In concluding our text, Paul writes, *"Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God."* True children of God are crucified to the world. It holds no charm for them and they are not lured by its pleasures, power, or honor. Christ alone is all in all to them. In Christ Jesus their life is centered. They believe and trust in him for salvation. As many as have this as the standard of their life shall have the blessing of peace and mercy. They are members of the true Israel of God, that is, the Holy Christian Church. They have the true peace of God that goes beyond all human understanding. They are at peace with God because they know their sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. This is the wondrous mercy God has shown to us for Jesus' sake.

From what Paul teaches in our text we should learn that no outward circumstance can save us. We cannot on this Reformation Festival say, "I am a Lutheran and therefore need not fear about salvation." We cannot say, "I was brought up as a Lutheran, baptized and confirmed, and therefore will be saved." Only one thing counts, that we now in our heart know the Lord Jesus as our Savior and trust in him for salvation. With the hymn writer we say,

*"Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me;
Died that I might live on high, Lived that I might never die.
As the branch is to the vine, I am His, and He is mine." Amen*
(Hymn 342:1)