

SERMON

Sermon for Mid-Lent Sunday

Gustaf Wingren

Galatians 4:22–31 · 1940

High Mass, 3 March 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Galatians 4:22–31

Hymns: 70:1–4; 79:6–8; 33:8–9; 40:1–5; 299:7–8

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us give thanks and pray.

*Now my whole heart thanks you,
Jesus, for your great distress,
for your anguish, for your pain,
for your cross and for your death;
yes, for all the bitter, heavy things
that you suffered for our sins.
Praise and honor be to you,
Lord Jesus, from the heart. Amen.*

(Swedish Hymnal 76:8)

The text is read.

*Let your word come to us, O God, the holy and the clear.
Let it be a guide to us in the darkness on our earth. Amen.*

Mid-Lent Sunday breaks the dark color of Lent and lets us see the light. The lovely picture of the feeding with bread is set before our eyes in the day's Gospel. And our Epistle text — "The covenant of freedom is better than the covenant of bondage" — is a word of joy and thanksgiving to us, even though it speaks a strange language and moves in images and turns of phrase that are foreign to us. What sounds out to us here is the ancient song of praise for freedom from the law. The slave woman Hagar, Mount Sinai, the present Jerusalem — that is the law, which keeps its children in bondage. The free woman Sarah, the mother of the children of promise, the heavenly Jerusalem — that is the gospel in Christ.

But the apostle does not mean only law and gospel when he speaks of the two covenants. When he speaks of the sons of bondage, he sees the Jewish congregation before his inner eye. When he speaks of the children of freedom, he sees the growing Christian congregation. That is why he can move straight on to the persecution of the Christians by the Jews. That is why he can speak of the growth of the congregation, which will leave the languishing Jewish synagogue behind. "The desolate woman shall have many children, more than she who has a husband."

The main thing in our text, however, is this: the gospel is freedom, while the law is bondage. This is an ancient song of praise in the Christian church — the thanksgiving that the time of the law has come to an end. It is the very core of everything the apostle Paul says and writes. It was also the joy that overshadowed all else for Luther and his brothers in the faith four hundred years ago. People were astonished at what the gospel meant, at the boundlessness of the freedom, and they thanked God.

Has anyone heard this song of praise now? No, that song of praise is no longer sung. Now people rejoice instead that they are managing to come in under God's law. They are thankful that they have at last bent their will under God's will, that they have begun to walk the way of action, the way of works, instead of the old sluggish walk of a Christianity of habit, with no proof of faith in one's life. There is a tremendous earnestness behind this song of praise that modern man sings to God — the God of commandment. There is a holy zeal behind his firm resolve to follow God's demands without haggling. But we cannot possibly hide from ourselves that there is an abyss between this modern song of praise to God and Luther's thanksgiving that the law is crushed, that freedom from the law is now won. We cannot possibly hide from ourselves that the text we have just read holds a joy of a wholly different kind from the Christian joy of today. Paul, like the men of the Reformation, thanks God that

he has freed his children from the law — and that joy is foreign to us. What can be the reason?

We do not know what law is. And that in turn is bound up with something else: people today no longer believe in the last judgment. Paul did, and Luther did. When they set out on the way of the law, when they began the journey toward the righteousness of works, they really meant to reach, by that way, spotlessness before God — blamelessness, a life beyond reproach. So when they failed in their striving, it meant far more than merely the failure of a human attempt. For of course they failed. So do all who try to fulfill God's law. But when they failed, the last judgment stood before them as the terrible end of all human life. Condemnation and merciless destruction waited for them at the border of death. Hell stood open, as Martin Luther testifies of himself.

This is the law. What is called law when one no longer believes in the last judgment is child's play compared with this consuming experience of the holy God's merciless demand for righteousness.

Into this anguish before the law, this certainty of being eternally condemned, the gospel of God's forgiveness struck like lightning. Do we begin to sense the reason for the joy and the song of praise? The liberation in the word of the forgiveness of sins reached over the whole of existence. It was like a man condemned to death being brought back to life at the last minute. It was more than that: it was the promise of salvation, as far as thought could reach, and on into eternity. God's mercy was one single, incomprehensible miracle. No song of praise could exhaust the heart's joy and thankfulness. No words could express the soul's jubilation. It went without saying that a person who had received so much unexpected grace was also transformed to the very ground of his heart — renewed, full of glad love toward everyone, equipped with a holy desire for "good works," so as to praise his Father in heaven in deed as well. But there was no need to talk about that. It would almost have been presumptuous to mention it. God's goodness was the only true goodness the eye could see. One's own goodness, tried to the point of despair in the time of the law, was and remained only a faint reflection of the heavenly Father's undeserved grace and mercy, revealed in the only-begotten Son. "We have nothing but frailty. In God is all our salvation. To God be praise and honor."

To understand the gospel, then, one must understand the law. Do we? Do we not regard the law as something we have at our own disposal? We do not think of the demand as something irrevocable, thrown onto our shoulders. We think of the demand as something we have

chosen to come in under. When we fail, we think: I will have to try again. It seldom occurs to us that our whole life will one day be examined and scrutinized before the judgment seat of the Eternal One. That each one of us will be judged, inexorably, according to his works — how often is that truth alive in your heart? It is because of this halfheartedness that we can live on the mixture of law and gospel that is now offered to us as spiritual food. The law does not terrify you, and so you can live on it all your life. Only when the law drives you to despair is its time over. Until then you can live in it, and until then it is God's will that you should live in it. The gospel of God's grace does not apply to the person who holds to the law.

This is the corruption in our Christianity: that we take neither of them seriously. People preach law, but sprinkle in a little gospel here and there. Then if one fails with one's works, one can always comfort oneself with the thought that God is good. This is a fundamental mistake. God is good and merciful, and he forgives the one who, in despair over his own wretchedness, throws aside all confidence in works and all faith in himself, and lays hold of the promise of salvation. But he is not merciful toward the one who in his heart seeks his own righteousness. Whoever does that has the law over him, and he must keep it in everything. Not one failure, not one false step may happen. Whoever does that has, according to God's own word, no right to take the words of the gospel on his lips. The word of God's forgiveness is a lie in such a person's mouth. In that person the gracious message of God's mercy serves no other purpose than to dissolve the earnestness in his life and to make God small and harmless — which he certainly is not. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

So let each one examine himself. When you hear or read the words of Scripture, ask yourself with incorruptible honesty whether you really believe that God is a holy God, who judges your sin and will one day scrutinize your life. Ask yourself whether you have awakened to the earnestness of being a human being. Ask yourself whether you greet the message that your sin is forgiven with jubilation and joy. Ask yourself whether you are willing to throw aside all your own righteousness as refuse — really, in truth — so that you no longer boast of it, either in your own eyes or before God and people. If you must answer no to these questions, then the law still has a work to do in your heart. The God you are dealing with is the God of the inexorable demand. If you must answer no to these questions, do not comfort yourself with the gospel. It does not apply to you — not yet. The one who goes the way of the law will come to a point where the gospel applies to him. But then the gospel wants to stand alone, without the law.

If, on the other hand, you answer yes to these questions, you are a child of God. If you fear God's judgment, if you want to cover your face when you look back on your life, if you tremble at giving account of your stewardship, then you are a sinner — and to such people God's forgiveness applies, according to Christ's promise, to such and to no others. The sinner can be recognized by one sure mark. He looks at the gospel of forgiveness as a hungry man looks at bread that he hardly dares to eat, because he believes it is meant for others. When it becomes clear to him that the gospel is meant for him, he wants only to thank his God and Father. To such a poor person God gives his gospel, for such a person does not misuse it for his own glory. He lets God be God.

Whoever receives God's forgiveness in this way is free. Completely free. People who knew him in his evil days will probably remember his sins, but God does not remember them. However flagrant the sins may be, they are struck out and blotted out, as if they had never happened. So the past has been lifted from his shoulders.

But he is just as free in the present. Wherever he turns, he does meet commandments and laws and rules about all kinds of outward things — we live, after all, in a Christianity of the law. No one can say exactly why this or that has been made the mark of a true Christian. But somehow it has come about that certain outward trifles have come to be regarded as indispensable for a Christian. The one who has received the forgiveness of his sins knows that he has been set free from busying himself with his own holiness, and he loves his neighbor plainly and simply, as one human being loves another. He is a child with his Father. And the child never thinks: "Now I must remember that I am to be a child. Now I must observe everything that grown-ups think is the mark of a child." The child simply is. That is what makes it a child.

So it is with a child of God as well. When the apostle wants to say what he means is the opposite of the spirit of bondage, he sometimes calls it the spirit of freedom and sometimes the spirit of sonship. Both words express the same reality: that the one who has God as his Father does not ask what he is to do in his new position. If he asks that, he still stands under the law. Then he has the spirit of bondage in him. A child of God feels it more nearly like this: now at last I have become a human being. He sees other people all around him, and he stands at life's disposal. My outward everyday life itself is a gift to me from the same God who forgives my sins. He gives me works already prepared, without my needing to search for what I am to do. If I begin to search for what I am to do, I begin at the same time to keep count of what I do.

Then the whole childlikeness of the Christian faith is destroyed, and the specter of self-righteousness begins to haunt me — ten times worse than all the sins of the flesh on earth.

The child looks at what the Father does, just as the slave looks at what the master commands. If I want to hold to the God of the law, I must do it as a slave, without claiming the rights that belong to the child. But if my heart has been made certain that God is my Father, then I must not let anyone in the world lead me astray from the spirit of sonship. We must be on guard against every such temptation to let go of boldness in faith. That temptation comes both from within, from the heart of little faith, and from without, from the world, which always wants to hold up its human works and its law before our eyes. And in the struggle against this temptation to bondage we must be just as resolute as our text is today, where it says: “But what does the Scripture say? Drive out the slave woman and her son.” Amen.

Let us pray. “Blessed be God..”

Translator's notes. “Träldom” is kept as “bondage” throughout, and “tjänstekvinnan” as “the slave woman,” so that the two covenants stay set against each other as they do in Wingren. “Barnskapets ande” is “the spirit of sonship,” the phrase he sets beside “the spirit of freedom.” “Slog ... ned” is rendered “struck like lightning,” the sense of the Swedish verb. The opening and closing hymn stanzas are translated for sense, not as metrical verse. The closing prayer is only begun in the typescript (“Lovad vare Gud, ...”) and is left as it stands.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·