

“No prison for God’s children” Gal 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Our text for today’s meditations comes from the apostle Paul’s letter to Galatians. He was dealing with very important issue. Galatians had been deceived by false teachers. They were confused what the Gospel of Jesus Christ was.

They were at risk of losing salvation and freedom and joy and comfort that the Gospel message gives to us. And you know what, - we are at this risk all the time. Every one of us, all the time.

Me, you, every Christian. Unless we are really careful and deliberate about teaching and preaching the Gospel in all its purity and power, we all are at risk of losing its benefits.

Paul the apostle uses here two images. One is about imprisonment and freedom. Other about putting on Christ, being in Christ. These are very helpful illustrations.

First, imprisonment. We need to understand that imprisonment meant something different back then. Today you have your judgment and then you go to a prison. Back then people were imprisoned waiting for their judgment.

It means, those who were imprisoned where lawbreakers, they were guilty and they were kept from doing more harm, and they were waiting for their judgment. But Paul the apostle speaks about the Law as imprisonment for all people.

What does it tell us? First, that we all are lawbreakers when it comes to God’s law. Meaning, we are guilty. Second, that we are kept imprisoned so that we don’t do more harm. God’s law prevents us from doing evil things. Third, that our judgment is sure and coming. Yes, we all are guilty and no one will escape justice.

Yes, but some can object, but there are so many good people in this world, who do only good things. Yes, and the answer is, - they do it exactly because they are imprisoned by God’s law.

If you are in prison, you don’t do bad things. The stronger the prison, the more disciplined will be your behaviour. Don’t be puzzled, it is quite simple to explain.

God's law has erected four walls to imprison the evil potential that we carry in our hearts. First wall is our conscience, it tells us that we are accountable, it prevents us from doing what we want, and accuses when we have done the wrong or haven't done the right thing.

Second wall is parenting. Parents teach us from early age that this is good and you will get a reward, and this is bad, and you will get a punishment. They teach us 'yes!' and 'no!'. So we learn to be better people.

Third wall is the state law and the law enforcement agencies. You know that if you break the law you will go to jail. Not a pleasant perspective, but a very good motivator to try to be good.

Lastly, rewards. It simply is rewarding to live as a good person. Others like you and you like yourself. These four walls are here to keep our inner evil potential imprisoned.

Think about this, - what happens when any of these walls fall? When people ignore their conscience, with time they become capable of doing terrible things. If children grow up without parents, who teach them right and wrong, where do these children often end up? That's right, in jail.

What happens with any society, when for a while there is no law enforcement available, when everyone can do whatever they want without fear of consequences? Terrible things happen.

This is how this prison of the Law works. Even those very good people, ask them why do they do good things? Their answer will be: "That is the right thing to do, I am a good person if I do the right things." Do you see? It is about the Law making them feel accountable and forcing them to strive to be good.

This is where all people are. Imprisoned by the Law. Not because they already have done something bad, but to prevent them from acting according the evil potential that we all carry inside.

This is our situation before the Christ. Imprisonment. You are guilty, because of what you have in your heart, rebellion against God, anger, lust, envy, jealousy, coveting, and so on, and you may strive to be good in your prison, but it won't change the fact that you are guilty, and it won't take away your judgment day.

Suddenly you receive the message. It is difficult to believe it. It doesn't make sense. Nevertheless it is true. Someone has taken your place. Someone has taken responsibility for what you have done and for all that you have failed to do.

This person has taken your place and received in full what you deserve. As the result, you are free to go. The doors of your prison are open. You have been forgiven, you have been justified, your judgment day has taken place, execution

has happen and ... you are free to go. Free! No more guilt. No more fear of judgment. You are absolutely free.

This is what happened to the Galatians. Paul had preached them the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God had taken their place, and that they were no longer under accusations of the law. They were forgiven and free. Free to enjoy the new life and to wait for the age to come.

This message is the power for salvation. And initially Galatians had left their prison and enjoyed their freedom. But then, and it sounds really stupid, then they gradually went back to their prison. Yes, on their own, voluntarily.

They couldn't believe that this wonderful message was true, instead they believe that if they will go back and will do something good, then they will be able to stand in their judgment day on their own.

What a nonsense, we may say. They already were forgiven. There was nothing for them left to do, but enjoy their freedom, but they chose to go back. They chose to put their trust in themselves, not in Christ. What incredible fools, right?!

This is why Paul was so upset and so concerned. The thing is, we all do exactly the same thing. Yes, we all, - you and me, and every Christian. We all are exactly this stupid.

Jesus gives us freedom, unconditional gift, regardless of who we are, something that we could never achieve, and never merit, He gives it as a gift, but we want to walk back into our prisons. We want to make it on our own.

How? Let's see. I'll ask you a few questions and you think about how would you answer them. Do ever wonder about any of these: Have I been good enough to stand before my Creator? Is my faith strong enough to be saved?

Have I been decent enough as a spouse, parent, member of congregation? Have I done what I had, or have and failed too many times? If I have to stand before God tonight, will He be angry at me? Where will He send me?

What will HE say about my failed marriage? What will He say about my children who are not in the Church? What will He say about the fact that I haven't brought new people to Christ?

Have you ever thought and worried about any of these or similar questions? If the answer is 'yes', then you are not free. You have been tricked to go back to your prison. This is what Paul was so upset about. It means that you think you need to merit, to earn God's favour. To be good enough on your own. You think that your standing before God depends on you, on how well you behave in your prison.

But you can't merit His favour. There is nothing you can do to take away your guilt, or to make up for your failures and wrong stuff that you have done. And the good news are that you don't have to. You don't have to!

You don't have to merit God's favour. You are justified before the holy God, you are forgiven not by what you do, but by what Jesus did. He sent you a messenger to say: "Come out of your prison, you are free, I took your debts on me, and paid them in full and I forgive you. You are free."

And we struggle to believe it: "Yes, but I am not good enough, how can I be forgiven and free? I have watched pornography, I have lived as a drunkard, I have killed my unborn child, I have committed adultery, I have deceived and lied, I haven't been honest, I've been greedy, I have been bad a Christian, and so on... I think that first I need to try to become better a person and then we'll see how it goes on the last day."

If you worry about any of these, you are choosing to stay imprisoned. Then you need to hear what Jesus says: "Whoever you are, whatever you have done and will do – I have already taken it all upon me, you are free, you are forgiven and you can go. The Law will not accuse you anymore. There will be no more judgement day for you. You are absolutely free. Go and rejoice and live as a free person."

What does it mean? It means that you are free not to worry how good a person you are, and whether you have done the right thing, or whether you have failed or not in your responsibilities.

It doesn't matter. Jesus has already forgiven you. The Father has already forgiven you. You don't need to worry about the last day anymore. When you trust that Jesus has taken your place, there is no day of judgment for you anymore.

Trust, faith – this is all that is needed. Your faith is as an outstretched arm that receives God's gift of forgiveness. But shouldn't we do at least something? No! You receive your freedom by faith, when you trust that this is true. That simple.

And there are no conditions attached. Jesus doesn't say... when you become better, or if you do this or that... or if you stop doing this or that. No, there are no conditions attached. It is a pure gift of this gracious God. And it's yours. It is!

Now, instead of focusing on yourself you can focus on others. You can focus on Jesus, with gratitude, and you can focus on others – how to serve them. Here it is good to remember the other picture Paul used, - you are in Christ. You have put on Christ. You are sons and daughters of God.

What does this all mean and what does it mean for us? More great news. It is not that you simply are free, but you also have received this new identity. The most important identity, which will remain forever.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” When you receive the Holy Spirit, in your baptism, in the Holy Communion, when you hear the Gospel message, something mind-blowing happens.

You are united with the Son of God, with Jesus Christ. You are united with Him in a mysterious way. The same Spirit who unites the Father and the Son now unites you with the Father and the Son. In one divine family.

All the things that separate our society in this world, don’t matter anymore in God’s family. All His children receive new ID. The most precious ID - a child of God. And this is who you are.

Paul explains: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” What is this about? First, just a little note, what it is not.

It is embarrassing that people keep using this verse in the ordination debate. “No male, no female” = anyone should be ordained in the office of public ministry. Paul here is not talking about God’s gift of the office of ministry.

He is talking about God’s undeserved grace given to us in Baptism. What Paul is saying – that before God we all are equal. None of us deserves His grace, but He abundantly gives it to everyone.

His grace makes us equal in Christ. We are all equally unworthy, we all are equally forgiven, we all equally need salvation, and God loves each one of you. God’s grace is what creates this new community in Christ, God’s own family.

God’s grace gives us this new identity, children of God. And this new identity has to shape who we are and how we live. As Paul said: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Jesus doesn’t take away our other identities. A spouse, parent, sibling, employee, employer, and so on. Instead He fills all these identities with new content. It is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you.

And as you live in flesh, in all your vocations, you live in faith, trusting that you are forgiven child of the Father and you are free not to worry about yourself. You know that the Son of God loves you and has given Himself for you, and now you are free to do the same for others.

That’s what Christian freedom is about. This is where your joy and peace and security come from. Knowing that you are free, that you are in Christ. This is who you are. Amen.