

“Which force are you under?” Galatians 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.

What we will reflect on today is one of the central questions for everyone. That is about the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. We all have heard these two words. Or as some say, these two theological concepts.

This is what Paul's letter to Galatians to great extent is about. About the distinction between the law and the Gospel. Even as Paul uses a slightly different language, for he speaks about the law and the faith.

The thing is, these two are not just some concepts. It would be much more appropriate to speak about them as about two mighty forces. Two fundamental forces. And the question that Paul is dealing with in this letter, and what we will reflect on as well is this – which of these two forces guide our lives?

Which force are you under? Do we live under the law or under the Gospel? This is not a theoretical, but a very practical question. For these are two very, very different lives. To answer this question, we first need to understand – how these two fundamental forces work?

So, how does the first force, the law works? As Paul describes, all people are born under the power of the law. And how can we know that all people indeed are under the force of the law?

In Romans the Holy Spirit speaks about it as the law of God written on our hearts. This strange thing is built into us, this strange voice speaking in us, that is – our conscience. It accuses us when we have done something wrong, or haven't done the right thing.

And when we have done what we believe to be the right thing, it excuses us: “You are good, you have done well.” It doesn't mean that our consciences are always fine-tuned and well qualified to guide us.

On the contrary, they often are twisted, distorted, obscured, meaning, they may not know clearly what is right and what is wrong. But even if they don't know it clearly, they still function powerfully.

And what is that that they do? They force everyone to try to be good. To justify their choices and actions. To put the blame away on someone else. To show that they are good and decent people.

People may not measure themselves according God given standards, but they will evaluate themselves according to some sort of standards. This mechanism is built into us. It's inevitable.

For example, gang members may be terrible towards everyone, breaking every law possible, but at the same time they will have a very strict code of conduct among themselves. Which they will keep, and if they do, they will feel that they have acted decently.

Another example. Some progressive people may seem advocating for abandoning of every last remain of so-called traditional morality, but they will fight like religious fanatics for virtues of tolerance and inclusivity. And that will give them the sense that they have done the right thing, that they are good.

Everyone tries to live up to some standards. This is how the law works. The question is not whether everyone lives under the force of the law, that's obvious that all people do, the question is only under what law one lives.

Many who really care about being moral and good people, they try to live under good laws, or we could almost say godly laws. Or even under God's own law as it is given to us in the Ten Commandments.

And when someone does it, no wonder they think that they are good people. For they try to lead good lives. And many who do that wrongly believe that that is what makes them Christians. Their good lives. No...

What would Paul say? Paul would say that such people are captives under the law, prisoners of the law. Then you are continually made to toil to establish your goodness. You can't rest. You can't stop. You never know the outcome.

In fact, till the last day such people will never know whether they have done enough to be good, or have failed. Whether they are going to heaven or to hell. So... they just keep toiling in never ending uncertainty.

And surely there is also a Christianised form of being prisoners of the law. When we try to lead decent lives hoping that our efforts will lead us to good relationships with the Triune God and eventually to eternal life.

Someone may try to behave well, care for others and attend the services, for that is the right thing to do. If someone does it only because that's how you make it to heaven, then they are nothing but prisoners of the law.

And don't get me wrong. It is not the worst thing to be captives of the law of God. If someone is, they could be a blessing to others, and that is much better than to be captives to twisted and distorted laws.

But ... at the end of the day, they are still prisoners. They are not free. The truth is that there is no great difference between different sorts of captivities. Prison is and remains prison, and no one can escape the prison of the law on their own. That's what it's like to live under the law.

But what is the alternative? How else could we live? What else could guide our thoughts and attitudes and actions? Here we come to the other force. Paul called it the faith, and we often call it – the Gospel.

The Gospel is the only force that can liberate us from the prison of the law and give us new life of freedom and joy. How is the Gospel, or the faith different? The law was about what we need to do.

The Gospel is about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And about who we are according to His plan. It is not about doing something to be good, it is about being who we were created to be.

The Gospel reveals to us a very different picture of God and of ourselves. A very beautiful picture. In this picture God is not just some sort of a higher being that keeps his human creatures accountable.

He comes to us as gracious and merciful God, He actually comes to us as one of us, as Jesus from Nazareth. He comes searching for us, for you, not for our good works, and He wants to invite us, to invite you to be with Him.

Through Jesus, His Son, He does something unprecedented, He makes everyone, who only desires to respond to His invitation, He makes them all members of His family, He gladly adopts them as His sons and daughters.

And as He does it, He declares it loud and clear, that you are good, that you are not only good enough in God's eyes, but because of what Jesus has done for you, also all your failures, shortcomings, even evil are dealt with, they are taken away and you won't be held accountable for them. You are forgiven.

He comes and announces that we are no longer under the accusing force of the law. The law will still show how much we fail, but our favour in God's eyes will not depend on how well we keep the law. We don't need to toil relentlessly not knowing what the final verdict will be, – good enough, or not.

We have heard God's voice speaking to us now. "Your toil is finished. Now you are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased." Because you are baptized, you have put on Christ, you are united with Christ, you are in Christ.

Therefore, when God the Father looks at you, whoever you are and whatever you have done, or failed to do, now He sees you in Christ, He sees you as His beloved child, a member of His divine family. That's the Gospel picture of God.

The Gospel gives us also this beautiful picture of who we are. Of who you are. That you are created in God's image and likeness, as His own precious representative, that you have infinite worth and dignity in the eyes of your Creator, your Father in heaven. That you are so precious to Him, so significant, that Jesus sacrificed His life for you, so that only He could have you with Him.

Moreover, He hasn't created you for this life only. He has created you for eternal life with Him, with the Creator of everything. For true life that will never end. For the life without suffering, and pain and death.

And in that life, He has promised that you will reign with His true Son, Jesus Christ. That you will inherit the Kingdom that has been prepared for those who love God our Father.

Now, how are our lives different when the Gospel force shapes our lives? There is freedom and lightness, for there is nothing that you need to prove, or achieve, or do to establish your worth and goodness. It is yours already.

It means that we can focus on what we are created to do, and what brings us joy, – on serving others. For we don't need to focus on ourselves, our Father and Jesus do that. We are free to focus on caring for, helping, loving all those people, whom God has put in our lives.

We are free to be as generous and as gracious, as patient and as forgiving as our God has been towards us in Jesus. When you are under the Gospel even the law as the Ten Commandments becomes the source of delight for you, for it tells you how you can please your gracious Father.

More, once our lives are guided by the Gospel, once the Holy Spirit persuades us about our true identity, worth and future, we can't help it, we long to share this new life with others.

We want them to know the truth, about how wonderful the true God is and how different from what people imagine Him to be. We want them to join Jesus' family so that they could receive and enjoy all the blessings that our Father pours over us already in this age.

We want them to be free from the toiling under the law, we want them to rejoice in knowing the true God in Jesus, we want them to flourish learning God wisdom and sharing the joys of being embraced by God's family.

As we are filled up with the blessedness of God's children, it flows over and we can't help but share God's goodness with other around us. This is what the Gospel does to us. This is what it means to be a Christian. Joy to the world...

As we can see, what Paul was writing to Galatians is equally important for us. We all tend to slide from being under the Gospel back to being under the law. That happened with Galatians. It does happen with us as well.

We are too used to be prisoners of the law, that we may struggle to live as free sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. It may even frighten us as being too good. But what a joy it is when we can experience the full force of the Gospel, when the Holy Spirit fills us, touches us, and allows us to taste the beauty and the power of our future already today.

There is nothing better in this world than to be under the force of the Gospel. This is why we came together here, called by our Father, to hear Him speak the Gospel to us, to remind us about who He is, who we are, and what awaits us. So that under the force of the Gospel you would be renewed and restored to be who your truly are.

Enjoy it, brothers and sisters, and give thanks to God!