

Martin Luther wrote in a letter to a friend, “Be a sinner, sin boldly and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world.” Now, do you wonder why this quote is not used often from the pulpit? I mean, when was the last time you heard “sin boldly” from the pulpit. James Swanson, a Luther scholar, comments on this sentence: “Luther’s point is not to go out and commit multiple amounts of gleeful sin each day, but rather believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly despite the sins in our lives. Christians have a real Savior” ([www.ntnrm.org](http://www.ntnrm.org), the New Testament Research Ministries web-site). Is this what Paul is saying to the Galatian congregation?

Paul has a deep concern for the Christians in Galatia. He is aware of the struggles they are having and of those who are challenging their faith in a variety of ways. Those who perhaps are even questioning God’s grace and forgiveness. A quick look at what the Galatian church in encountering is in order.

There were those who were distorting the faith. As we examined last Sunday, there were in Galatia those who wanted the Galatian converts to become Jews before they became Christian. They wanted them to follow all the rules and regulations of the Jewish community as proof of their acceptance of Christ. When you become as we are/were then you are truly a part of our community.

There were those who saw faith as a program of works. In order to be “saved” you needed to build a ledger sheet with more on the credit side than the debit side. If you do enough works then you will be fine, but if you falter and fail to build up enough credits, well then... Sorry!

And there were those who were questioning the past. Now, not all questioning of the past is bad. In fact, it is healthy to question why we do things and discover the implications of why certain things are done. I remember a woman who had cooked a roast the same way her mother had for years. She always cut off one part before putting it in the roasting pan. One day, when she asked her mother why, her mother responded. “The only pan I had was not big enough for the whole roast and so I just cut off one end!”

There were those in Galatia who were wondering what good was the Law? If it is not longer in effect, if it is not to be followed, what good was/is it? Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, writes:

*“The purpose was to make obvious to everyone that we are, in ourselves, out of right relationship with God, and therefore to show us the futility of deriving some religious system **for getting by our own efforts** what we can only get by waiting in faith for God to complete his promise.” (Emphasis mine)*

The Law had a purpose. Peterson uses the image of a tutor, but for us today I think the right image would be that of a nanny. Its goal was to make sure that

we were safe. It was to guide us along the right pathways and in the right relationships. It was a watch-care provider. Of course, every child loves mud puddles. I mean, isn't that what God invented mud puddles for—the happy feet of little boys and girls? As many times as we say “don't step in the mud puddles” we know that the lure of the water and mud will win. Lecture after lecture from mom, dad or the nanny cannot keep us from the mud puddles!

The Law, however, could not fulfill its goal. As parents we want to protect our children 24/7. We want to make sure that every aspect of their life is safe. Yet, we know there comes a time when we cannot provide the 24/7 watch-care and we have to let go and trust. It is never an easy time to let go, we just pray that we have guided them along the way. The Law served its purpose but we were not able to follow it as we should.

Therefore, Paul, if the Law does not contain our standards for living, what does? Paul's simple but complicated answer is: faith. It is by faith that we have a relationship with the living Christ. It is by faith that we have accepted Christ's standards as ours. It is by faith we live our lives not in fear but in the light of God's love and grace.

I like bumper stickers. I wish there were more of them. It gives one something to do in slow moving traffic. Saw one the other day that caught my eye: “If you don't talk to your cat about catnip, who will?” But for today the one that came to mind is, “Don't just sit there, do something.” There are those people and institutions that are afraid of making mistakes, of failing. Rather than try something new they try nothing. What if I/we fail? Because of fear they never move from where they are.

I am sure this could also be said of the church although we frame it a little differently. We ask, “How much will it cost?” and then respond, “We don't have the money!”

I often told other congregations that the congregation I pastored in New Hampshire was the best in the State. No, it was not the largest in the State by far, nor the wealthiest, etc. I said that because they allowed me to fail. They were willing to let me try new things. For example: We decided to have a block party. We took a map and drew a ½-mile circle around the church and sent out invitations, went door to door and did all that we could to invite people to a wonderful, “getting to know one another block party.” We had free hot dogs, clowns, games for the kids, activities for adults, etc. We had four people show up! We had hot dogs at every church dinner for the next year (they do freeze well). And, we learned. If we do another one we may need to involve more of the community if we are going to make it a success.

I recall that it took Thomas Edison 2,000 attempts before he had a successful light bulb. When a reporter asked him about his failures he is reported to have replied, “I never failed once. I invented the light bulb. It just

happened to be a 2,000 step process.” We need that type of determination in the life of the Church.

For me, this is the essence of Luther’s statement. Life is to be lived. Life is to be celebrated. Our standard of living should be one of faith and hope. Our God is a God of grace. Might we fail? Yes! But our God is one who understands. But we must try...step out in faith.

In light of this, what is your image of God? Your standard of faith? Do you see God as a heavenly policeman giving out tickets for every misdeed? Do you see God as one who is waiting to punish us for every mistake we make? Do you see God as a cosmic Santa whose sole purpose is to grant our requests? Do you see God as an EMT who comes to our rescue when we are in trouble? Or, do you see God as the father of prodigal children – a parent who watches and waits for us to return home, the prodigal sons and daughters. Waiting, not to punish but to throw a party.

Paul concludes with the statement we all know. The statement that turned the world upside-down. **In Christ we are all one.** In Christ the old divisions have vanished. The walls of separation have been torn down. The rules and regulations are gone. We are one because of Christ. Grace, love and forgiveness are now our standards for living and loving. Faith is the norm we follow.

Our standards for living must be Christ in all his fullness. Paul says it simply when writing to the church in Philippi, “...continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12b). Not that our salvation is dependent on our works. Not that we can do anything to save ourselves, other than believing in the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. But we must go out and be present in the world with “fear and trembling.” Our standards are God’s standards of love, grace and forgiveness. This is our hope, our faith. As Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*:

Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—  
full of himself but soul-empty.  
But the person in right standing before God  
through loyal and steady believing  
is fully alive, really alive.  
--Hab. 2:4

Or as the NIV writes: “The righteous will live by his faith.”—our Standards for living!