GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

THE WORD THAT READS US

SESSION FOUR: THE WORD THAT FREES

Central Question

If the Gospel has given us the righteousness of Christ, what does that freedom mean for the way we live and serve our neighbors?

Central Claim

Christian freedom is not a new religious project. Having been justified through Christ, we are released from the need to establish our righteousness before God. We are free to attend to the needs of our neighbors without making our good works evidence of our spiritual worth.

Primary Texts

Galatians 5:1–14; Galatians 6:1–10; Romans 12:1–8; John 13:1–17

I. WHAT HAS THE WORD DONE TO US?

Throughout this course, we have been asking how Christians should read the Bible. We began with the history and methods of biblical interpretation, then turned to the Law and Gospel.

The Law does more than instruct us. It exposes our sin and brings our attempts at self-justification to an end. The Gospel does something entirely different. It announces that God justifies the ungodly through Jesus Christ.

But what happens next?

Our instinct is to turn the Christian life into another assignment. Having received salvation by grace, we suppose that we must now demonstrate our worthiness through greater obedience, devotion, or spiritual progress.

Forde challenges this understanding. The Gospel does not free us from one religious project only to burden us with another. Our righteousness before God rests entirely upon Christ.

For Discussion: Why do we find it difficult to believe that nothing remains to be accomplished for our justification?

II. FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Galatians 5:1–14.

5 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

The Nature of Christian Freedom

2 Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working[a] through love. 7 You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? 8 This persuasion is not from him who calls you. 9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump. 10 I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. 11 But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!

13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.

Paul declares, "For freedom Christ has set us free." He then urges the Galatians, "Through love be servants of one another."

Notice the order. Service does not produce freedom. It follows from the freedom Christ has given.

This changes the character of Christian ethics. We no longer need our neighbors to become evidence that we are good Christians. We can attend to them without constantly measuring the religious significance of our actions.

Luther expressed this paradox in *The Freedom of a Christian*: the Christian is free before God through faith and yet becomes a servant of the neighbor through love.

The freedom of the Gospel turns us away from ourselves and toward those who need us.

For Discussion: How would our relationships change if we no longer needed our good works to demonstrate our righteousness?

III. LOVE REQUIRES MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS

Romans 12:1–8.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Christian freedom does not mean indifference to moral responsibility. It means that our responsibility is directed toward the neighbor rather than toward establishing our standing before God.

But love is not an abstract principle that automatically settles every practical question.

A physician needs medical knowledge to care for a patient. Those making public policy need economic understanding and sound judgment. Parents, teachers, and pastors must consider circumstances, consequences, and the needs of particular people.

Scripture commands us to love our neighbors, but it does not provide technical answers to every problem we encounter.

The Christian is free to use reason, experience, and the best available knowledge in the service of others. This is part of God's work in preserving and ordering earthly life.

Christians may therefore share the same commitment to loving their neighbors while disagreeing about the best practical means of doing so.

For Discussion: How can Christians distinguish between a disagreement about God's command to love and a disagreement about the best way to serve the neighbor?

IV. READING SCRIPTURE AGAIN

John 13:1–17: Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet.

13 Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. 5 Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. 6 He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet,[a] but he is clean all over; and you[b] are clean, but not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "You are not all clean."

12 When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant[c] is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

We conclude by applying what we have learned to a familiar biblical passage.

Jesus washes the disciples' feet and commands them to serve one another. We ordinarily read the story as an example of humility, and rightly so. But there is more to hear.

The Text: Jesus performs the work of a servant as he approaches his death. Peter resists receiving this service.

The Law: Jesus' command exposes our pride, our reluctance to serve, and our tendency to make even humility a religious accomplishment.

The Gospel: Before Jesus commands the disciples to serve, he serves them. His action points toward the cross, where he gives himself for sinners.

Freedom: The disciples' righteousness does not depend upon their success in imitating Jesus. It rests upon the Christ who has given himself for them.

The Neighbor: Having received Christ's service, they are free to serve others according to their actual needs.

The passage is therefore more than a lesson about behaving humbly. It reveals the Lord who first gives himself to sinners and then frees them to love one another.

For Discussion: What changes when we begin with what Jesus gives rather than with what he commands?

V. THE WORD THAT READS US

We began by asking, "How should we read the Bible?"

The answer is not simply that we must discover the correct rules or master a better method of interpretation.

We must read attentively, respecting the text's words, history, and literary form. But we must also ask what God is doing through this Word.

What does the Law expose? What does the Gospel give? Where is Christ being proclaimed? And how does the freedom of the Gospel turn us toward our neighbors?

We should not force every passage to contain an explicit statement of both Law and Gospel. Rather, we read each passage faithfully within Scripture's larger witness to Jesus Christ.

The purpose of theology, as Forde understood it, is not simply to explain religious truths. It is to serve the proclamation through which Christ addresses sinners.

CLOSING PROCLAMATION

You do not leave Scripture having mastered the Word of God. The Word has found you.

It has exposed the righteousness you tried to establish for yourself and has given you another righteousness altogether: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for you.

For his sake, your sins are forgiven. Nothing remains for you to accomplish to secure your standing before God.

You are free to acknowledge your failures, free to receive forgiveness, and free to attend to the needs of your neighbors without making them instruments of your salvation.

You will not do this perfectly. The old Adam will have his say, and you will need the promise again tomorrow. But Christ's faithfulness does not depend upon yours.

The Word has found you, and Christ has made you his own. **For freedom Christ has set you free.**