

The Law and the Gospel

Galatians 3:1-22

Introduction What a strong and striking opening! The Galatians are foolish and bewitched. Why does he say this? They are moving away from the essential teaching of the gospel. In the last paragraph of chapter 2, he has highlighted the power of Christ and the provision of the cross.

When we lived in Germany, I saw many things that made me wonder why we continue to do things the way we do. For example, hanging a door on hinges. A German door hinge is very simple pin and socket. The pin screws into frame. The socket screws into the door. Very simple to install and to adjust. Our hinges are quite a bit more complicated. However, both hinges will work only if the pin is right. The pin holds everything together and allows the door to open. So, the closing bit last week is like the pin in a hinge. So, before we work with hinge I want to remind us of the pin.

So, just as a reminder from last week:

In a short pity statement, Paul says the following. God demanded death for violating His commands. In the law God made that clear. Under the sentence of the Law, Jesus died. When He died, He satisfied the demands of the Law. Therefore, through the Law, by faith in Christ, we have died to the Law. Now, don't think of death as a cessation, or an ending. Think of it as a separation from. The Law goes on, as we will find out. But through the crucifixion of Christ, I have been separated from the realm where the Law is in force (v.19). Furthermore, I have now been brought to life so that I might live in the realm where grace is in force. Separated from the Law by the death of Christ I am now alive to live for Him. The trajectory of transformation is not under law but towards Christ. This same argument is expanded and explained more fully in Romans 6-8.

Since we have died to the Law and are now alive in Christ, we must renounce law righteousness and live unto Christ (v.20). The life we now have in union with Christ is His own life imparted to us and residing in us through the Spirit. We have been united to Christ so that we are in Him and He in us (John 17:23). So, the life we now live in the flesh, this life we continue to live here and now, we live *by faith* in the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. *To go back to law is to not live by faith. It is to snub and shun the one who loves us. It is to deny the full effect of why He gave Himself for us.*

The relationship between the gospel and the law has been one of the most difficult in Christian history⁶. What is the place and role of the Law in this New Covenant age? Now that Christ has come, what is the right and true function of the Law? This passage in Galatians is one of the most definitive and clear statements of the past and present temporary and subordinate purpose of the Law and the grand preeminence of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

For the sake of your faith in Christ for salvation and transformation, hear the gospel this morning.

The Contrast to Faith**(v.1-9)**

Here is the problem, they ought to know better. In his preaching, Paul had openly displayed the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, as crucified. He asserted the historical fact and applied the theological implications. He did so as an Apostle. Now, the intersection of their foolish hearts and mesmerizing false teachers is causing a spiritual car wreck.

An Examination of their Experience of Faith**(v.1-6)**

Deeply probing questions expose their inconsistency. How did they come to experience the New Covenant, gospel realities? Did they experience them through the Law or by faith? Did they receive the Spirit by the works of the Law? No, they received it by the hearing with faith. Does Christ do miracles among them by the Law? No, they are done by the hearing with faith. So, if the Spirit and miracle of salvation come by the hearing with faith, then we should not expect to go on by Law.

Are we saved by the hearing of the Word mixed with faith? Yes. Notice that it is a mixed with faith hearing. The Scriptures are not magic. The powerful work done by the Spirit of God is in conjunction with and accomplished via believing. Even the suffering we experience to grow in grace and be transformed will be void if it is by the works of the Law and not by the hearing with faith.

In verse 6, Paul then goes to Genesis 15:6. Paul used this text in Romans 4 to argue the same point. The purpose of Genesis 15 is to establish that salvation is for all who believe. So, Abraham is going to be featured in several sections. This is because the false teachers were arguing that only sons of Abraham could be saved and only the circumcised were sons of Abraham. Understand that if this argument is true, then we are lost. We are not saved. I doubt that anyone in the hearing of my voice has consciously and intentionally become a Jew in order to be saved.

Abraham is the example of salvation by faith. He believed what God promised. He trusted God to bring about that promise. His hearing of the promise was mixed with faith to believe the promise. Through believing God and His Word, God put His own righteousness to Abraham's account. This is the doctrine of imputation. This is the Biblical teaching that we have a right standing with God because God has put His righteousness on our account and accepts based on that alone. He does not accept based on His righteousness mixed with our own. He does not accept based on His righteousness and even the righteousness He causes in us. Like Abraham, we put our faith in God alone and receive His righteousness and are justified on that basis alone.

An Explanation of the Man of Faith**(v.7-9)**

Here is the key issue: who are the sons of Abraham? All those who believe are Abraham's sons. So, Paul grants that to be saved one must become a son of Abraham. This is not an issue for him. He is not here just talking about those following the example of Abraham, but that in some way all God's people are Abraham's children. All those who believe are Abraham's sons.

Why is this important? Looking back to Genesis 12:3, Paul sees two important ideas in the text.

In the words of the text, the Scripture is foreseeing the salvation of the Gentiles. In the promises made to Abraham is embedded the idea that even the Gentiles will be justified by faith. Here is a New Covenant reading of the book of Genesis. The words meant that Abraham's blessing would be to all. The Jews and many commentators consistently misunderstood what that blessing is. It is the great blessing of being justified by faith.

In the words of the text, the Scripture is preaching the gospel to Abraham. So the gospel, the good news about salvation, is also good news about who can believe. It announces before the Law⁷ that anyone who believes in the God of the Bible can be justified, can have a right standing with God.

This is really good news. You and I can be saved. We are so used to the idea that Gentiles can be saved that this being good news almost sounds odd. It has a "well, of course" sense. That is true for us because Paul and others have withstood all attempts to make our salvation and transformation a law-centered thing. It is a Christ-centered thing. It is a faith obtained thing. It is a grace granted thing. It is for anyone who will believe. The last sentence places us all, Abraham, Jew in the Old Covenant, Jew and Gentile in the New Covenant all on the same footing. We all receive the blessing of justification by faith alone.

The Condemnation by the Law

(v.10-14)

Now we turn to why the Law is not how we are justified (and later, transformed/sanctified). He is dealing with the argument by the false teachers that the Law, since it describes righteousness, but be able to produce it.

Its Realm under the Curse

(v.10-12)

In verse 10, Paul appeals to Deuteronomy 27:6 to show to show that the Law does not save, it curses. It can only describe sin and sin's punishment. It cannot and does not provide the remedy for sin. Those who rely on the Law put themselves under the curse of the Law. In the realm where the Law governs, one must do everything single thing the Law requires, both in attitude and action. This is hopeless. There is no one who can, in every thought or deed, keep all the Law. Paul is here saying that you cannot, for the sake of this discussion, carve the Law up into sections, apply some and ignore others. Submitting oneself to the Law for righteousness, whether positional at our salvation or practical and progressive in our transformation, brings us back to where we must obey every bit of it *ourselves*.

But Paul goes on to show that this is not even the worst problem. No one is justified, has a right standing with God, by the Law. Being justified is only by faith alone. Paul is emphatic that this is what Habakkuk 2:4 is saying. Three times in Paul's writings he quotes from this verse. He understands its meaning as being the same. He applies to three different situations as he emphasizes different words in the verse. Here the emphasis is the Law not being of or originated by faith. It is in the realm of the Old – that is, the Old Covenant and the old creation. So citing Leviticus 18:5 and clarifying it in Romans 10:5, Paul shows that the

Law is a unity in itself and is a unity as it is applied – to attempt to do them is to make yourself responsible to live by them.

Our Rescue by the Cross

(v.13-14)

Finally, appealing to Deuteronomy 21:23, Paul asserts that the curse of the Law and its demand for punishment by death has been met. Becoming our curse on the cross, Jesus satisfied the requirements of Law as it relates to our sin and as it relates to our righteousness. Christ has accomplished what we could not. He perfectly kept the Law and so fulfilled what was required. But, here the focus is on His bearing the punishment demanded by the Law. He had to bear the curse of the Law. The Law declared in Deuteronomy 21:23 that anyone who hung on a tree was cursed. This Old Covenant text pointed to Christ who would hang on the cross and bear the curse for us. What a blessing for us. We are no longer under the Law nor under its curse. It has been taken for us. The principle of substitution is also clearly important here. Christ took our curse so we can receive Abraham's blessing. Christ stood as a sinner in our stead so that we might receive the blessings of Abraham in Him.

This last phrase is very interesting. Paul equates the blessing of Abraham with our receiving the Spirit. There is a receiving of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant that is defining and distinct. It marks the New Covenant people and age as much as receiving a new heart or all New Covenant people being saved. So we are receiving the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant sense both as being brought into the New Covenant and as being Abraham's sons.

The Covenant with its Inheritance

(v.15-22)

So, since we are recipients of the Holy Spirit by faith as Abraham's sons in faith, then we are receiving the Spirit as part of our inheritance. This is what Paul moves on to now.

The Promise to the Heir

(v.15-18)

God made a direct promise to Abraham about a descendent who would receive the inheritance. That promise was given first. In fact, it was given while Abraham was still a Gentile, before he himself was circumcised. That promise cannot be canceled by the Law, which came later. We know this because, using a human illustration, once a contract is written, signed and ratified, it cannot be changed. The Law then cannot change how the inheritance is passed on to sons.

However, Paul notes that in the promise, the word descendent is singular. This stands out in the Genesis text because otherwise it is plural. Paul then argues that the descendent must be Christ. Jesus is the One who receives the blessing of Abraham and the full inheritance God promised. He is the seed, the descendent, the son. We receive the inheritance by virtue of our being in Christ. The Law has nothing to do with this. The Law cannot annul the promise. It cannot change the promise. It cannot redefine who the heir is or heirs are. It is powerless in this regard.

Further, the inheritance is not created nor constituted by the Law. It does not come through the Law. The blessings of Abraham do not come through the

promise and through the Law (v.18). They are mutually exclusive. So the Law was not given to enable the reception of the inheritance promised to Abraham.

This was a stunning blow to the Judiazers. They were arguing that both justification and the blessings that we receive having been justified are Law-centered. According to them, the Law existed to show us what the blessings were and how they were to be achieved and received. Paul has just shown that a covenant people are justified by faith and receive their inheritance through promise, not through Law.

The Purpose of the Law

(v.19-20)

So, what is the Law for? Why was the Law given? Here is the clearest statement in all the New Testament about the purpose and duration of the Old Covenant Law. I am going to pause here a bit and parse this sentence, for it is essential to answer all who would reinterpret justification or return us to the Law.

The Law *was added*, was given to supplement and complement. There is a distinct sense in which Paul is saying that it was not included as a part of the original promise/blessing to Abraham. It was added, not as the inheritance itself, not as a part of the inheritance, not to pass along the inheritance, not to define or qualify the recipients of the inheritance, but for another reason.

The Law was given *because of transgressions*, because of the multiplying of sin in the world and among the physical descendents of Abraham. So the Law is oriented towards sin and designed to expose and punish sin. It has a descriptive and prescriptive function. But it cannot cause what it calls for. No law or law principle can. The speeding limit only tells me where the boundary is. It does create the boundary and it cannot cause me to keep to the boundary. The Law was added then because both Gentiles and Jews kept pushing the boundaries of sin. So it was added to show what sin is and what the consequences would be.

The Law was added *until the Lord Jesus* came. When the heir came, when the offspring came into this world, time of the Law came to an end. Now that Christ has come, He has shown what righteousness is both within and outside the Law. He has fully obeyed God and displayed both the Law and the life. So, there is distinct sense here in which the Law is thought of as coming to an end with the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The Law was put into place *by angels through an intermediary*, Moses. The Law then is mediated. However, the promise is given directly, first to Abraham and then to Jesus. There are no angels between God and Abraham and God and Christ. The Law then is valuable for its purpose, but nevertheless, it is has lesser standing than the promise. I believe Paul says this here to bring to the table all of his teaching in Romans, Ephesians and what was preached in Hebrews.

So the Law is added. It came because man was such a terrible sinner. It was in force until Jesus came. It is less than the promise because it was given indirectly.

The Provision through Faith

(v.21-22)

Once again, we have to understand what Paul is saying in such a way that the next objection is natural. Paul anticipates that people reading and listening to this will then say, “Paul is teaching that the law is contrary or contradicts the promises.” (V.21). This is stunning. The logic that constructs implications may lead to conclusions contrary to the Scripture. Some form of this objection sends many commentators to go back and look for ways to tone down what Paul has just said. If it sounds to you like I have said that the Law and Promise are in conflict then I have taught this passage close to the way Paul meant it.

Several important assertions are being made here.

The Law is not contrary to the promises. The Law cannot bring what the promises do. The Law cannot fulfill the promises. But the Law is not against the promises. So it has a right and proper function in its place.

The Law by its nature cannot give life. The law has a merely descriptive function. But it cannot impart the life that it calls for and that is required. It is primarily an instrument of death, as Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians.

Righteousness is a matter of life, not rules. The failure of the Law is in its nature. It cannot impart life so it cannot give righteousness. Righteousness and being alive spiritually are intertwined. The righteousness we receive by faith is the result of life given in the new birth. It causes a restored relationship with God.

Finally, in closing this section and preparing for the next section, Paul shows that what he teaches is rooted and grounded in Scripture. His Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament texts was just as startling then as it is now. It is curious to me that many expositors and commentators have the same functional way of understanding the Old Testament as the scribes, Pharisees and Judiazers.

So, the Scripture says that everyone was imprisoned and guarded under sin, in the realm where the Law has force. This is both a historical reality in the function of the Mosaic Law and is the spiritual reality for those who have not yet believed. This important, but temporary function of the Law is so that the promise by faith in Christ may be given to those who believe. The subordinate place of the Law highlights the grand preeminence of believing in Christ, of hearing with faith.

Conclusion This text speaks powerfully to us today. We need to hear Paul saying these things lest we to become bewitched by false teachers claiming to give us deeper truth.

Let us believe the gospel. Hold fast to Christ and Him crucified. He has been preached and publicly displayed through our words and our worship to be the crucified one through whom you are saved and transformed.

He was crucified for you and you have been crucified with Him. Yet you have been made alive so that now you live, not by keeping the Law, not by extra Biblical techniques, not by deeper life secrets, not by casting out sin-demons, not by anything but by the hearing with faith.

Stand in the spiritual blessing of being a son of Abraham. All your identity and inheritance is in Christ. He is the One through whom all God's good for us comes. All the promises are fulfilled in Him. In Him, you receive the promises. Don't let anyone rob you of your blessing and your spiritual inheritance by adding to or taking away from the centrality of Christ in our faith.

The Law has its place and purpose. We will be seeing more about that as we continue to follow Paul's thinking two weeks from now. But the Law cannot define, destroy or diminish the promises, the covenants that God has made. We are the recipients and participants in the New Covenant. We have been brought out of the realm of sin where the Law reigns and now are in the realm of life where righteousness reigns through grace.

Reject all forms of self-righteousness. Turn by faith to believe the gospel, to put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. You cannot have a right standing with God by works. You cannot weigh out your sins with good. You cannot be received by God through anything except abandoning all self-reliance, self-righteousness and self-improvement. It is your sin and your sins that separate you. It is your Savior who redeems, reconciles and restores you. It is His righteousness that is put to your account. Believe in Him and bow to Him, today.

And it is no less for those of you who have already been regenerated and thus have repented and believed in Christ. You also must reject any law righteousness and rely solely on the one who has loved you and has given His life for you. You not only have been saved by faith, but you will live by faith. As you believe God's Word and close with Christ, His transforming Spirit and grace change you until the day we all awaken and our faith becomes sight as we gaze on Him whom we love because He has first loved us.

Here is the gospel that we are to hear with faith, to believe in order to be saved:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Notes

⁶ For some who are students of historical theology, this message is going to frustratingly ignore several strands of theological thinking. This is not out of ignorance of them, but out of an exegetical rejection of them. Those who want to limit the Law to the ceremonial and civil aspects and try to make the “Moral Law” permanent and binding, this text is aimed directly at your error. I have similarly rejected the variegated use of “nomos” popular in many circles. It seems to me that what Paul is referring to in any text by the word “Law” is either what the commentator wants him to be saying or what his framework demands he be saying. If we let the text speak for itself as I try to do here, all this difficulty simply goes away.

⁷ The way Paul speaks here convinces me that the references to the Law through this section of Galatians are not to the Old Testament as a book, nor just to the civil or ceremonial code contained within the Law, but to the Law as the whole of the governed relationship between Israel and God. The 10 Words form the foundational principles for the rest of the ceremonial and civil law. But they are limited in their scope and deeply intertwined with the culture and community of Israel as a nation. From Galatians, Romans and Hebrews, New Covenant Christians must resist any attempt to make the church equal to, a replacement for or a needful return to Israel. Dispensationalism as a system has generally failed to see that the church is connected redemptively to the old Covenant through Christ. Covenantalism has generally failed to see that Israel and the church have their primary locus in Christ, not in each other. As a New Covenant believer, I see Christ as the descendent to whom all the promises aim and in whom all the promises are fulfilled. Then, all those who believe, are placed into Christ and thus, by virtue of being in Christ, receive the fulfillment of those promises.