

Galatians: Faith Alone in Christ Alone

The Law's Impotence (Galatians 3:15-25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on June 16, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ This summer we've been in the book of Galatians. And we've seen that the presenting issue is that false teachers have been telling non-Jews (Gentiles) that they need to adopt Jewish law and custom if they want to share in the blessings secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.
 - And the one custom, according to Jewish Law, that could understandably deter Gentiles from converting and becoming Christ-followers – is the Jewish practice of male circumcision. **And, interestingly enough, it was the false teachers who presented themselves as those ones taking Scripture seriously and reading it literally. They accused the Apostle Paul of playing fast and loose with Scripture – ignoring laws and commands that are plainly there in the text.**

- ❖ But the thrust of Paul's letter to the Galatians is to argue that the gospel he preached to them – the message of good news for all. A gospel that promised new spiritual life and right standing before God to the Gentiles – without expecting them to become Jews. To adopt Jewish law and custom. Gentiles can become Christ-followers without performing the works of the law. You don't need to be circumcised. You just need faith alone in Christ alone.
 - And in today's text, Paul is going to argue that his reading of Scripture is perfectly sound. He's not playing fast and loose. **He's actually respecting the narrative nature of Scripture and reading it along its overall storyline.** He's not trying to ignore or downplay the laws and commands that might deter a non-Christian from believing. He's not watering down Scripture or blunting its edges. It might seem that way to a devoted Jew who loves the OT Law. **But what Paul is demonstrating is sound biblical exegesis. He's showing us how to read and interpret Scripture along its narrative arc of promise-fulfillment.**

- ❖ And the result of that kind of biblical exegesis is a biblical theology that assures Gentile Christians that you don't have to be circumcised; or keep kosher; or perform a ritualistic cleansing before dinner. Which I assume is a huge relief for all of us.
 - **Because have you read Leviticus lately?** There are laws and commands in there that will raise a few eyebrows. You probably know about the prohibition of eating pig meat – no pork loins, no pork ribs, no bacon (Lev 11:7). But did you know that it prohibits the eating of any shellfish? No shrimp or crabs or oysters (Lev 11:12). Do any of you have a pet lizard – a gecko or chameleon? If you've picked it up with your hands, then you're unclean according to Leviticus (11:29-31). Are any of you wearing a shirt or skirt or pair of pants made of two or more kinds of material? I'm sorry but you're in violation of Leviticus 19:19. The same goes if any man here asks a barber to give you a fade. *"You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard."* (Lev 19:26) And I'm not even going to ask who here has a tattoo. *"You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves."* (Lev 19:27)

- ❖ **My point is that Christians today read and respect Leviticus as God-inspired Scripture, and yet we don't treat most of the laws and commands in the book as binding today.** And we have Jesus to thank for that. We also have Paul to thank – because in this morning's text, he provides us the exegetical basis for laying aside these commands. He gives us a biblical argument for no longer requiring the works of the law in order to become a full-fledged member of the people of God.
 - But then that raises a sticky question. **If we agree that certain commands in the Mosaic Law – like the ones regarding circumcision and eating kosher – are no longer applicable, then why do we insist that other commands in the same Law are binding?** This question is often directed at the commands in Leviticus that regulate the sexual ethics of God's people. Prohibiting same-sex relationships and any other sexual activity that falls outside of the conjugal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. Isn't it inconsistent to try to maintain those laws while brushing aside things like circumcision? Again, are we just playing fast and loose?
 - These are great questions that Paul will help us to answer. So let's get into our passage. We're going to see how Paul responds by unpacking three roles that the Law plays. (1) The subordinate role of the Law. (2) The reflectional role of the Law. (3) The custodial role of the Law.

The Subordinate Role of the Law

- ❖ Let's consider the subordinate role of the Law of God. Subordinate, that is, to the Promise of God. Since we're jumping into Paul's argument in chapter 3:15, we have to recall his point in vv1-14. Paul told these Gentile believers that the fact they received the promised Holy Spirit – while in an uncircumcised state – is proof that circumcision is no longer binding. The Spirit in you is now the sign of the covenant. Not circumcision or any other work of the law.
 - And Paul goes on to warn that anyone who continues to rely on works of the law – who attempts to get right with God by obedience to law – are cursed under the law. But those who rely on faith in Christ crucified are blessed with the promised Spirit and the blessing originally promised to Abraham (3:14).
- ❖ That was Paul's argument in vv1-14. **Now in v15, he appeals to biblical theology and argues that the Mosaic covenant (based on Law) is subordinate to the Abrahamic covenant (based on Promise).** Which means the subordinate covenant can't undo or undermine anything in the more primary, more foundational covenant.
 - In v15, he uses a human example to argue from the lesser to the greater. *“To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.”* **If even human covenants are considered irrevocable – how much more a covenant that God establishes?** That means the covenant God made with Abraham (back in Genesis 15) cannot be revoked by a subsequent covenant made with his people through Moses (later in Exodus 24). Look at v17, *“This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.”*

- ❖ Now keep in mind the Promise made to Abraham in Genesis (12:1-4; 15:5). **It was a promise to bless him and his offspring so that they might be a blessing to the nations – to the *ethne*.** That Greek word can be translated as *nations* or *peoples* or *Gentiles* (like in v14). Paul’s point is that God always had in mind a plan to bless the Gentiles even as he promised to bless one *ethne* (the Jewish people). Their mission was to extend that blessing to all the *ethne* of the earth. To all the Gentiles.
 - When the Mosaic covenant was established 430 years later, it in no way altered God’s original promise. Paul is saying the two covenants are closely related, but they’re not on equal footing. They both relate to God’s unrelenting commitment to his people. **But the Abrahamic covenant is characterized by promise and faith.** The main focus is on God’s faithfulness to keep the covenant based on his own promise. **But the Mosaic covenant is characterized by law and obedience.** The focus is more on the people’s performance in keeping their end of the covenant.

- ❖ **These two covenants don’t exist on the same level. It’s not like they’re two amendments in the same Constitution.** Where a later amendment has the power to alter or to altogether repeal a former one. Just consider another human example. Consider how, in the US Constitution, you will find the 18th Amendment and the 21st Amendment. The 18th Amendment made it illegal to make, transport, or sell alcohol. But fourteen years later in 1933, the 18th Amendment was repealed by the 21st Amendment. That’s possible because there you’re dealing with amendments of equal footing. The latter supersedes the former.
 - But that’s not the relationship between these two biblical covenants. Don’t picture them existing on the same level – in the same legal document like amendments. Picture instead the Abrahamic covenant as the more foundational between the two. So it can’t be annulled or altered in the slightest by any subsequent covenant.

- ❖ **Paul’s rivals were suggesting both covenants can co-exist on equal footing.** That the inheritance of blessing given to Abraham can be received by both Promise *and* Law. But Paul argues in v18 that both can’t be true. One will contradict the other. *“For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”*
 - **In other words, the Genesis blessing is going to come to us either by God’s promise or by our performance. It can’t be both.** That’s why these two covenants with two different emphases are not on equal footing. The covenant made with Abraham is foundational. It reinforced a divine promise to bless him and his offspring in order to bless all the Gentiles of the earth. **Therefore, God relates to us all on the basis of promise and not performance – not by works of the law.** Which is why circumcision is not necessary for Gentile believers.

- ❖ The only thing necessary is faith in Christ. **Since Jesus Christ was ultimately the One to whom God was promising the inheritance of blessing all the way back in Genesis.** That is what Paul was arguing in v16. *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.”*

- ❖ **Paul is giving us a pattern and permission to read OT Scripture with a Christocentric lens.** It's like re-reading a book after you know how it ends. It changes your experience the second time around. You see how the author was foreshadowing the ending in subtle ways – even in the beginning of the book! **In the same way, Paul can't read Genesis 12:7 without seeing Christ in it.** When the LORD promises, *“To your offspring I will give this land,”* Paul understands the use of a singular noun as pointing to a singular fulfillment of this promise in Christ Jesus, the true Offspring of Abraham.
 - **In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of the original Genesis promise.** This inheritance of blessing promised to Abraham and his Offspring. That they might extend that blessing to the nations – to the Gentiles. But if Paul's rivals were correct – if Gentiles had to first become Jews in order to experience the blessing – then the Promise to bless the Gentiles remains unfulfilled.

- ❖ **But Paul's gospel insists that Jesus is the fulfillment. That the Promise was ultimately made to him.** So that for anyone – Jew or Gentile – if you receive Christ by faith, you get to share in this inheritance of blessing. You receive the promised Spirit. You're justified – counted righteous in God's eyes. And you're a full-fledged member of the people of God. **Not because you performed. Not because you maintained the works of the Law. But because of a promise that you believed. That you received by faith alone in Christ alone.**
 - Some of you need to hear that this morning. You need to hear that your efforts to perform; to please God; to prove something to him; to secure his blessings – that those efforts are in vain. They leave you cursed. You need to hear the good news that Christ has come. He has fulfilled the Promise by performing *his* work on the cross; by pleasing God through *his* obedience; by proving the faithfulness of God; by securing the blessings of salvation – even for you, if you receive Jesus by faith alone.

The Reflectional Role of the Law

- ❖ But if Paul is right – if the Mosaic covenant (with all its laws) is subordinate to the Abrahamic covenant (with all its promises), does that mean we can ignore the Law now that Christ has come? Isn't that what we do for all the Jewish customs we, as Gentile Christians, no longer practice? **But then what value is there in the Mosaic Law nowadays?** Especially using it to teach and enforce certain ethical behaviors today.
 - Thankfully, Paul anticipates these questions. Look at v19, *“Why then the law?”* Why did God give it to his people? What's its purpose and role? Paul knows that's where our mind goes. And he answers it. Let's keep reading. *“It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.”*

- ❖ So the Law was given to us *“because of transgressions.”* Now that's been understood to mean the Law was given to teach us what sin is. Sin is a transgression of God's righteous standards. But without the context of Law, we wouldn't understand sin in those terms. **So the Law reveals sin. In many ways, the Law functions like a mirror.** This leads to our second point about the Law playing a reflectional role in our lives.

- ❖ Like any mirror, the Law is intended to reflect an image. And primarily it's the image of the Lawgiver. **In giving his people the Law, God was using it like a mirror to reflect himself.** The Law is righteous as God is righteous. The Law is compassionate as God is compassionate. The Law is just as God is just. The Law is merciful as God is merciful.
 - The Law as a mirror reflects God's holy image. **But when we stare into the Law long enough, we begin to see another image – an unholy image of ourselves.** The Law reveals our sinfulness. That we are transgressors by nature. In our reflection, staring at the Law, we see how filthy we are and how we need to be washed clean.
 - But the Law can't help you with that. **The Law can show you your sin, but it can't save you from it.** It can't wash you clean. When you look in the mirror, you can see how filthy your face is, but are you then going to start washing your face with a mirror? Rubbing your face with it? That'll make things worse. The Law can't help you there.

- ❖ Now in vv19-20, Paul is still stressing the insufficiency of the Law. His specific point is not as clear. It's debatable. But I think he's suggesting that the indirectness of how the Law was transmitted signals its inferiority when compared to the Promise. The Law had to be transmitted to God's people through angels and then put in place by an intermediary like Moses. Whereas the Promise was given directly to Abraham.

- ❖ Now, again, Paul anticipates that the way he's arguing might lead to erroneous conclusions. **Some might grow a very negative view of the Law and assume the Promise and the Law are opposed to each other.** Look at v21, *"²¹Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²²But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."*
 - **Paul is saying the problem is not the Law.** The Law is effective at showing you how you ought to live in righteousness and to reflect the glory of God. But it's impotent (powerless) to enable you to actually live that way. It can't change your sinful heart. But blaming the Law for its inability to give you new life is like blaming that mirror for its inability to wash your face. That's not its intended purpose or role.
 - **You're supposed to use that mirror according to its purpose – to show you what needs to be cleansed. And then you turn to living waters to do the actual washing.** In the same way, the mirror of the Law – that showed you your sin – is also going to point you to Christ, whose Living Waters will wash you perpetually clean. And whose Spirit can change you from the inside out.

- ❖ But until Christ came – incarnate in human history – Paul goes on to say in v22 that the entire witness of OT Scripture imprisoned everything under sin. **That kind of language is meant to emphasize just how bad off we are as sinners and how powerless the Law is to help.** We don't just fall a bit short of doing God's will and just need a boost to do better. No, we are imprisoned under the captive power of sin. We don't need the Law to enlighten us. We need a Savior to rescue us. And that's who Jesus is. That's what he came to do.

- ❖ So why then the Law? Why did God give it? **To reflect the holiness of God and to expose the unholiness of man.** And the more we experience the Law's impotence to change us – to make us holy – we're turned away from the Law and our instinct to perform. To work. Making us ready to receive a gift – to believe a promise in faith and humility.
 - **So as Christians, we still read the Law and love the Law because the Law reflects the Lawgiver.** The God we love. But we're not bound to the Law like the OT saints in Israel. Not because we think such laws and commands are outdated and backwards. Not because we're so much more sophisticated. **No, we don't keep the ceremonial laws regarding sacrifices or circumcision or kosher – because in Christ their purpose has been fulfilled.** These laws were ultimately given by God to point us to Christ – and now he has come.

- ❖ Paul's rivals were the ones reading Leviticus in isolation. Failing to see its contribution within the unfolding narrative of Scripture. When Leviticus says you can only approach God if you avoid eating certain things, touching certain things, or wearing certain things – or else you're ceremonially unclean – it never expected the works of the law to be the ultimate answer. They're temporary restrictions to reinforce the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness.
 - **The underlying message behind these ceremonial laws is that we are spiritually unclean and unable to approach God and live in relationship with him – unless we experience a purification that goes deep enough to the heart.** And the Law simply can't help you there.
 - But Jesus can. And that's why, in the fullness of time, he came, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law's captive power (4:4-5). His blood is the Living Fount that washes us of sin and purifies our hearts for good. **So apparently a right reading of Leviticus is necessary for a right understanding of the gospel.**

- ❖ Now here's where we need to be careful. Just because we're not obligated to keep the ceremonial Law anymore – doesn't mean that everything else in Leviticus is also obsolete. **There is a needed distinction to be made between the Law's ceremonial aspects and its moral aspects.** So, for example, the sexual ethics taught in Leviticus still guide us, and they're reinforced in the New Testament.
 - But it's not like we strive to obey these laws as a means of securing God's favor or blessing. **No, we use the moral Law according to its function and make it drive us to Christ.** And it would still be accurate to say that he fulfilled the moral Law. Not by making it obsolete. But by satisfying the penal consequences of our failure to keep it. And providing the Promised Spirit who writes the Law on our hearts, so that we *want* to keep it. And indwells us with the actual *power* to keep it.

The Custodial Role of the Law

- ❖ So we've seen how the Law takes on a subordinate role in relation to the Promise, which is central to the Abrahamic covenant. We've also seen how it plays a reflectional role like a mirror – showing us our exceeding sinfulness but also showing us our sufficient Savior.

- ❖ If we continue in vv23-25, we see another role for the Law – a custodial role. **Where for a fixed season the Law functioned like a guardian over God’s people in their adolescence.** They’re still children, so they still needed a babysitter. But once reaching maturity, they’re no longer under a guardian. They’re no longer under law. So they should live in that freedom.
 - Let me read the verses to you, “²³Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”

- ❖ A guardian in the ancient Greco-Roman world would’ve been a household slave given charge of the children until their later teenage years. **Guardians weren’t technically their teachers. But they were responsible to teach the children their manners and to generally keep them out of trouble.** So guardians were very much concerned with your behavior. But their job was primarily to keep watch over the children and attend to their needs. They were essentially babysitters with authority.
 - Paul was smart to use this analogy because he knew his original audience grew up with a guardian. And regardless if the experience of being under their guardian’s authority was positive or negative – **his audience could relate to how freeing it was to hit that age when you’re finally done with a guardian.** And we’ll see, in next week’s passage, that he keeps running with this analogy to emphasize the reality of sonship and our freedom from the law.

- ❖ **But here, at the end of our text, he’s using this analogy mainly to highlight the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law’s interim role and authority over you.** Just as a guardian’s role and authority has a fixed end date, so too at a certain point you can step out from under the guardianship of the Law and live in the freedom enjoyed by all Christians – by the true sons and heirs of the Promise.
 - Under a guardian, you’re being told to do what you naturally don’t want to do. Because if you don’t do it, there will be consequences. Life under a guardian is characterized more by fear than freedom. **But one day you’ll be old enough to be done with a guardian. Because you’ll be mature enough to do the right thing on your own.** You won’t need a guardian watching over your every move. It’s freeing!

- ❖ **Many Christians will testify that when they first came to a realization of their sinfulness and need for God, they experienced a season where they were very religious.** They were hyper vigilant about cleaning up their lives and getting involved in church. They surrendered their life to Christ (multiple times).
 - **But looking back at that point in their journey, they realize now that they were still under the guardianship of the Law.** They were merely resolving to be very good, very religious people. Hoping that all of that commitment and service would result in an outpouring of God’s favor and blessing. But by relying on their own performance, they lacked the peace that comes from a reliance on God’s promises.

- ❖ **So at that stage in their journey, they were experiencing the kind of emotional ups and downs you'd expect from children.** Feeling good about themselves when they maintain their spiritual commitments and feeling horrible if they failed. Their religious lives were marked by great anxiety and fear. They were regular in worship service, active in small group, involved in youth group – but they were still children under the guardianship of the Law. They were on their way to experiencing the freedom of the gospel – but not yet.

- ❖ So what's your story? Can you testify to the same experience? **Are you now enjoying the freedom of the Christian life?** Where you're following God – obeying his moral Law – not simply because you *have* to but because you *want* to. Is your obedience motivated by gratitude and joy (because you're secure in God's love and favor)? Or are you still being motivated by guilt and fear (because you're anxious of losing his love and favor)? Are you still trying to prove yourself worthy of it?
 - **The point is that you can be active in church and live a religious life – and still be a child under the guardianship of the Law.** Please don't confuse that kind of religiosity with Christianity. Don't be satisfied until you've experienced the freedom and maturity of life under the gospel and no longer under law.

- ❖ And again, I can't stress it enough. **Don't walk away thinking: Gospel good. Law bad.** The law is good when used appropriately – as a guardian, a custodian, a babysitter. But once you enter a new age of salvation in Christ, then you don't need a babysitter anymore. You're an adult. But that gives you no right to speak poorly your former babysitter.
 - If you're a grown up who keeps treating your babysitter like a master or a father figure – that's on you. Don't belittle the babysitter for not meeting your unrealistic expectations. In the same way, don't disparage the Law. Just be sure you know the proper role of the Law and use it properly to reveal your God and drive you to Christ.