



## **GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING**

### **Why Then the Law?**

**GALATIANS 3:15-22**

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#### **The Law and the Promise**

<sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

<sup>19</sup>Why then the law? 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. <sup>20</sup>Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

<sup>21</sup>Is 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. <sup>22</sup>But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

#### **Introduction**

When I go to peoples' houses, I always enjoy seeing what's on their refrigerator: family photos, school calendars, grocery lists, the kids' latest art projects, wedding invitations, magnets, bumper stickers, baby announcements, a reminder of the next doctor's appointment—just about anything and everything!

How about you? What's on your refrigerator?

We have one or two pictures on ours. But smack-dab in the center, prominently displayed so they can't be missed, are our three Wilson family rules. These are three simple and common sense rules we consistently work with our children to follow. First, no talking back; second, no interrupting; and, third, obey the first time.

But you know the interesting thing we've found with our kids: posting these rules on the refrigerator doesn't actually create the behavior in their lives. Posting our Wilson rules, of course, isn't pointless. It reveals something of our standards; it sets clear expectations

for our kids, it provides them with boundaries of appropriate behavior, and it communicates how we want them to interact with their parents. But, at the end of the day, these rules don't ultimately bring about the very obedience they command.

Rules are like that, aren't they? They can guide behavior, but they can't create it. Every parent knows that to be true. But the same is true of laws as well. Every police officer knows that to be true. In fact, the 7 million people in the US who are in jail or prison or on parole or probation are evidence enough that laws themselves don't create compliance.

Yet this is true even of God's law. God's law—the one he gave to the people of Israel through the hand of Moses on Mount Sinai—it calls for righteousness, but it cannot create righteousness. Which is the basic weakness of the law: the law cannot give you the desire to do the very thing it commands. Would that it did!

You see, the law can guide desire, but it cannot give desire. Or, as this passage says, *it cannot give life*. This is the burden of what the Apostle Paul wants to say; in fact, this is the main thrust of what Paul says about the law in Galatians. The law itself cannot do the most important thing: which is to give you life. Only God the Father, who gave life to his Son by raising him from the dead, can give you life through his Holy Spirit; the kind of new life you need to live the kind of new life God desires for you.

We live in a world of laws and rules and ordinances and policies. Everywhere we look, we find someone laying down the law for us. And how prone we all are to think that we can find life from looking to the law—God's law or man's laws! As fallen creatures, we seem hard-wired that way, to think that rules are where the life is.

If you're wondering whether that's true, simply look to the example of children. How easily they fixate on rules as though the rules were what give life. Perhaps that's because their parents can so easily assume and thus act as though the rules were the means of giving life. And I think if each of us will only take an honest look into our own hearts, we will see how quick we are to go to the rules or the expectations or the law and there try to derive power for living. Perhaps this is most tempting for Christians themselves, those who take God's law, and human laws, seriously.

### **Law and Promise (3:15-18)**

What this passage teaches, then, is medicine for each of us. But let's first remind ourselves of where we've been and what we've seen. God made a wonderful promise to Abraham that he would bless the world through him (3:6-9). Yet Paul goes on to say that in effect the law has blocked the flow of God's blessing and thus hindered the realization of God's promise (3:10-14). What God promised to Abraham didn't come through the law; in fact, just the opposite, Israel came under the curse of the law rather than the blessing of God.

In this first passage (3:15-18), then, Paul no doubt felt compelled to deal with how God's law relates to God's promise. More specifically, how does the law God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai relate to the promise God made to Abraham when he said, "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (3:8)?

If you simply followed the storyline of Scripture, you would have good reason to think the law God gave to Moses directs the flow of God's promise to the nations. First came the promise given to Abraham; then, 430 years later came the law given to Moses. And, so, presumably the second, the law, channels the flow of the first.

Think of the law as a funnel into which God pours his promised blessing. This is how some first-century Jews, like those stirring up things in Galatia, and some twenty-first century Jews, view things. If you want the blessing promised to Abraham, you must come to the law to get it. If you want Abraham's blessing, you need to become a child of Abraham, one of his offspring to whom the promise was given. And this means you must become a part of the Jewish people, the nation of Israel, by embracing the law and its works and way of life.

If you spend any time at all on the Internet, you've no doubt come across pop-up advertisements: they're those boxes that show-up on your screen in bright, flashing colors and promise you something fantastic like a new iPad or an all-expense-paid trip to Maui. And, amazingly, all you need to do, they tell you, is just click the button at the bottom of the screen. Now, if you've been suckered into one of these too-good-to-be-true offers, you now know how they work. While they make this great promise up front, it's actually not nearly that simple; they go on to add something to the offer that makes it decidedly more complicated.

However, Paul wants to say that God's promise and law don't relate to each other in that way. The law doesn't come along afterward and modify or complicate the giving of the promise or the terms of the covenant God originally made with Abraham. As Paul says, "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" (3:15).

But, more importantly, Paul clarifies who is the true recipient of God's promise to Abraham; ultimately, he says, it's not Israel, nor is it the church. According to this passage, the true recipient of God's promise to Abraham is God's single seed, Christ. "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 offspring,' who is Christ" (3:16).

Here, then, is the main point about God's promises: *Christ Jesus is the one true beneficiary of all God's promises*. God has given everything to Christ. Every blessing God wants to give to the world and to you and me, he has already given to Christ. Thus, every blessing we seek, every good thing in the world, is to be found in Christ himself. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20).

So, then, we share in these promises by coming to Christ and being found in him. "In you shall all the nations be blessed," God said to Abraham. But how do we get in Abraham? Not by getting in Israel through the law, but by coming to Christ by faith. As Paul will say a little later on in Galatians, "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. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:25-26, 29).

Christ is the center of all that God is doing in the world; he's the center of all that God wants to do for the world and for you. So don't make the mistake the Galatians were

making, of looking elsewhere beyond Christ for God's blessing. It can only be found in him, as you look to him by faith, as you rely upon him in trust.

### **Law and Sin (3:19-20)**

Paul, then, summarizing the message of the Old Testament and the experience of the Jewish people, says that the law which God gave to Moses did not serve to bring about the promise. So what, then, is the purpose of the law? Or, as Paul goes on to ask, "Why then the law?" (3:19).

That's a very good question. And Paul has a very straightforward answer; it's a profound answer, but it's also a provocative answer. "It was added," he says, "because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made" (3:19). God gave the law because of sin until he had definitely dealt with sin through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Think about that. God gave the law because of sin. So, too, societies write laws because of sin; and villages issue ordinances because of sin; and parents make rules because of sin; and teachers post classroom guidelines because of sin; and employers have company policies because of sin.

Of course, if children were always obedient, there'd be no need for rules, much less spankings or timeouts. And if students were always honest, there'd be no need for guidelines about cheating, much less suspensions. And if citizens were always law-abiding, there'd be no need for laws, much less policemen or prisons. And if the people of God were sinless, there would be no need for the law of God, much less its curses and judgment.

Yes, God's law, like our household rules, reveals to God's children something of who he is. But his law is primarily intended to curb sin and keep it from escalating. That's the point of what Paul's saying here.

Ironically, however, the law has another effect among God's people, as it did the people of Israel in the Old Testament. For what they realized was that in an attempt to curb sin, the law actually served to expose sin and bring it to the surface. Thus, the law revealed not only the nature of a holy God, but the nature of sin as well: its power and subtlety, how sin can both control and confuse, dominate and deceive.

So, then, we need to be crystal clear on the purpose of the law, otherwise we'll get ourselves turned sideways. Everything God created has a purpose, and as such is a good thing. However, even good things can become bad for us when we forget their purpose and use them for something they were never intended to do. Charles Spurgeon had a nice way of capturing this thought. He liked to say, "A handsaw is a good thing, but not to shave with." To cut wood, yes, but not to cut facial hair. If you put your handsaw to that use, you'll wind up losing more than hair.

"There's sense in choosing your tools," Spurgeon therefore says, "for a pig's tail will never make a good arrow, nor will his ear make a silk purse. A good thing is not good out of its place."<sup>1</sup> And if that's true with handsaws and pig's tails, how much more with God's law!

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Complete John Ploughman*, pp. 190-191.

The purpose of the law is to restrain sin and yet in so doing the law winds-up revealing sin's true subtlety and power.

How true this is to our own experience, whether with God's law or human laws! How creative we are at working around God's law or human laws to suit our own purposes! We know how the law can animate sin and vice within our own hearts; we hardly need the lesson book of the Old Testament; we see it in our own lives.

### **Law and Life (3:21-22)**

Paul, then, seems to be saying that the law's purpose is largely a negative one: it's intended to restrain sin and thus reveal sin. But this could easily imply to some that the law itself is against the promises; the law seems to have hindered rather than helped God's purposes. "Is the law then," Paul asks, "contrary to the promises of God?" (v. 21a).

My kids wouldn't like it, of course, if I told them that our three Wilson rules were going to help them see the subtlety and power of sin in their hearts rather than help them walk in obedience to their mom and dad and perhaps even earn them a little dessert. No doubt, one of our older children would put two and two together and then complain: "C'mon, that's not fair! What, are these rules out to get us?"

His answer is both direct and to the point: "Certainly not!" (v. 21a). But why not? Well, listen to what he says: "For if the law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law" (v. 21b).

The law cannot give life. This is Paul's fundamental insight into the law—God's law, the Jewish law, the law of the Old Testament. But this same insight equally applies to all laws and rules and ordinances and commands and requirements. They cannot give life!

What does that mean? It means that the law itself cannot provide you with the motivation to do what the law calls you to do. It can certainly guide you in doing God's will, but it cannot motivate you to want to do God's will. It can tell you how to channel your desires in a way that honors God, but it cannot give you God-honoring desires.

Understand, then, that it's not the law's fault that you can't keep the law; nor certainly is it the law-givers fault. Instead, the fault and the blame rest with you and with me. God's good law is weakened by our flesh, our fallen human nature, our sin—something we've all inherited from Adam; something we only find deliverance from in Christ. When our first parents fell into sin in the Garden, we too fell headlong with them into the pit of sin and cannot get out on our own, no matter what we do. This is the dramatic thing Paul says in 3:22: "But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin."

This was true even for the children of Israel. And this explains why their own history as a nation was dominated with sin and judgment. Even though the nation was redeemed from slavery in Egypt, the people themselves were not on the whole redeemed from slavery to sin. And although God had delivered the nation physically, he chose not to deliver them spiritually—at least, not most of them.

Thus, when this redeemed yet unredeemed people received the law at the foot of Mount Sinai, it didn't go so well. God provided them with the right circumstances to obey his law;

but he had not given them a heart to obey his law. They were still spiritually dead; they'd not been made alive. Therefore, the law was their undoing; it brought a curse, rather than a blessing.

But here's the good news of the gospel, and here's the message of hope to those who by faith are in Christ Jesus:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:2, 3-4).

Christ Jesus died in order to deal with your sin and every transgression you have committed against God and his law and will for your life. But more than that, because Christ Jesus was raised, he now gives life through his Spirit, whom he pours out in the lives of his people. So that now, if you're in Christ Jesus, you await this hope of righteousness, not through the law, but through the Spirit by faith (cf. 5:6). And you live by faith in the promises of God, depending upon the Spirit for strength and power.

We live by the Spirit, not by the law. It is the Holy Spirit of God that gives life to our dead souls and causes us to love God and the things of God; and so if we live by the Spirit, let us, as Paul says, also walk by the Spirit (5:25). Let us follow the leading of the Spirit, stay in step with the Spirit, and thus bear the fruit of the Spirit. For the law holds out not a curse but a blessing for the fruit of the Spirit (5:23).

## **Law and You**

This passage has invited us, then, to grapple with God's law and its purpose in God's plan of salvation. We've wrestled with the law and promise, the law and sin, and the law and life. Now, the only thing left is to take up the question of the law and you. How does God's law relate to your life? What can you and I glean from our understanding of the role of God's law in God's plan to bless the nations?

*First, remember that the law has an important but limited role in your life.* The law's purpose is not to give you life, but to help guide you in living out the life you already have. When you need motivation, look to the person and work of Jesus Christ and trust in his promises to you. Seek to live the life God would have you to live by faith, and not by the law; look to God's gracious provision in Christ rather than to God's clear demands in his law. Don't ignore the law; let it guide you. But don't let it be the motivation.

*Therefore, secondly, root your life in God's promises, not in God's law.* This is what it means to be gospel-rooted. People who root their lives in the law rather than in the gospel tend to be cold, prickly, sharp, and brittle. They're not pleasant to be around, at least not very pleasant to get up close to; they're like spiritual porcupines. Friend, don't root your life

in God's law. Instead, root your life, find your sustenance, not in soil of the law but in the soil of the gospel. As you do that, your life will be filled with the lush, happy fruit of obedience.

*Thirdly, rely upon the Holy Spirit by faith for the motivation you need to live.* Motivation, to live to the glory of God and in accord with God's will, comes in two ways: by treasuring God's promises in his Word, and by experiencing God's presence through his Holy Spirit. And these two always go hand-in-hand. The Spirit of God likes to walk lockstep with the word of God. This is because the Spirit of God loves to honor the Son of God, who is the Word of God.

So as you look to the Bible to find the strength and motivation you need by treasuring all that God promises to be for you in Christ Jesus, trust that the Spirit will take that little spark of intention you have and turn it into a flame of gospel-rooted motivation.

Amen.

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