

Freedom and the Law

Galatians 3

May 15, 2022

At this time, I don't know if we will meet Sunday. I'm preparing this lesson supplement in case we do, or, perhaps, in case we don't! The speaker from Ukraine is being featured in the "Contemporary Issues" class, and I am sure that will be interesting. At the same time, I will be prepared in case there are those who would like to visit this scripture from Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian churches on his way back from the Council of Jerusalem. The issue before the council was whether Gentiles professing faith in Jesus would have to become Jews in order to be Christians. Would they need to obey the Law, as set forth in the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets)? Acts 15 describes the Council of Jerusalem. I think this passage helps us understand that context for Paul's writing in Galatians.

Acts 15: ¹³ **After they [Paul and Barnabus] finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers,^[b] listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,**

¹⁶ **'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,**

¹⁷ **so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the gentiles over whom my name has been called.**

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.'^[c]

¹⁹ **"Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled^[d] and from blood.²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues."**

b. [15.13](#) Gk *Men, brothers*

c. [15.18](#) Other ancient authorities read *things. Known to God from of old are all his works.'*

d. [15.20](#) Other ancient authorities lack *and from whatever has been strangled*

So, the Council of Jerusalem decided that Gentiles did NOT have to become Jews. But, within Asia Minor where Paul's Galatian churches were, so-called Judaizers had been preaching that gentiles DID have to become Jews, including obedience to all of the provisions of the Law including circumcision, kosher regulations, and all else. Apparently Paul received word that the members of these Galatian churches had been swayed and convinced that they had to become Jews. Paul was furious. He used some pretty strong language in this letter, which seems to be an immediate reply upon learning about this. (Check mid-way in Chapter 5.)

But, should Christians disregard the Law? Are we free from any concern about what God's rules were for his chosen people, the Israelites? Do the Ten Commandments not matter? Paul argues in the letter to the Romans that we studied recently, 6:1-2 **What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?** Paul is not arguing for licentiousness, although there were those who accused him of that. No, he was arguing for a higher sense of righteousness that did not depend on the Law. He explains that to the Galatians in our scripture passage for the day. I'm including a few verses earlier in Chapter 3.

Galatians 3: You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! ² The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

⁶ Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," ⁷ so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.

¹⁰ For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for "the one who is righteous will live by faith."^[b] ¹² But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law^[c] will live by them."....

¹⁷ My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise, but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring^[h] would come to whom the promise had been made, and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party, but God is one.

21 Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through the faith of Jesus Christ^[i] might be given to those who believe.

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous^[j] by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring,^[k] heirs according to the promise.

b. [3.11](#) Or *The one who is righteous through faith will live*

c. [3.12](#) Gk *does them*

h. [3.19](#) Gk *seed*

i. [3.22](#) Or *through faith in Jesus Christ*

j. [3.24](#) Or *be justified*

k. [3.29](#) Gk *seed*

This is how Paul, a good Jew and a Pharisee, has now come to understand the Law. It is not a means of salvation. Indeed, the Law, or more properly the inability of sinful man to fully obey the Law completely, convicts. It shows that we fall short of what Righteousness requires. Instead, it is Faith in God which saves. Our lesson book uses the analogy of a child being ordered by parents not to cross a street without holding the hand of an adult. Upon reaching adulthood, or even much earlier, that child reaches a maturity that makes this “law” unnecessary. Is this a proper analogy though? I cannot think of any one of the Ten Commandments that should be dispensed with by us as Christians. The kosher laws, perhaps so. We can see how a law against eating pork would be helpful for the Jews in antiquity, and perhaps beneficial for ecological reasons even much later. The Pharisees, including Paul earlier, saw in the keeping of the Law a route to righteousness. Paul is telling us that's a dead end that can lead us astray.

A problem with “Law” is that it is expressed in human language, and applied with human logic. There are clever people who can devise ways to manipulate the Law or its application to unrighteous ends. Jesus spoke of one of these ways in Mark 7:9-13.

⁹ Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God^[a]), ¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus nullifying the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

a. [7.11](#) Gk lacks *to God*

Jesus is talking of manipulating the Law to justify not giving help to a parent. Once an “Offering” is made to God, it cannot be withdrawn; that would be sinful. So, the clever action is to declare anything that might be given to the parent is a gift to God. With that one declaration, the person is relieved of having to support a parent, even though the supposed gift has not been given to God. This is how the Law was interpreted to turn what was intended for good into an evil action that is consistent with the Law as written and interpreted. Jesus is telling them that they cannot fool God. Being an adept words lawyer, to stay within the Law while doing evil, does not make one righteous. Law is helpful to those who want to learn and do righteousness. It does not give cover to wrongdoing.

Ultimately, we all, those who keep the law religiously, and those of us who don’t, depend on the mercy of God and His grace. Paul mentions Abraham, who lived before there was “Law.” Abraham was loved by God, was promised an inheritance, and lived by faith. He was reckoned as faithful. Paul is saying we are saved the same way. Further, we have Jesus to look to. In faith, we strive to do right, and pray for forgiveness when we don’t. In Jesus, his ministry and teachings, and ultimately His demonstration of God’s great love for us, we find God’s forgiveness and healing for our souls. In that we are truly freed. We are no longer bound by sin.

Prayer: *God of grace and truth, help us to grow in understanding of what the law can teach us while we also grow in accepting and living in your grace. Amen.*