

SONS OF ABRAHAM
Part 6

TEXT: Galatians 3:6-14

March 21, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In Galatians 3:6-14, we have been studying how Paul uses Abraham as a “test-case” and appeals to the OT Scriptures to confirm that justification is by faith alone apart from works of the law.

The Judaizers insisted that the way the Galatians (i.e., Gentiles) become true sons of Abraham (come into favor with God/justified) was by keeping the law.

Paul, however, in vv. 6-9, appeals to the OT and shows that it teaches that faith alone has always been the pathway to a blessed (i.e., justified) life. Abraham was justified 14 years before he was circumcised and 430 years before God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And so it is clear from the Scriptures that Abraham was justified by faith alone and that the true sons of Abraham are those who believe like Abraham.

In vv. 10-14, Paul continues his discussion of the sons of Abraham and reveals how works of the law are in reality the pathway to a cursed life. He will show why justification by works of the law [cf. 2:16] is impossible. Instead of issuing a sentence of justification, the law issues a sentence of condemnation upon all who fail to keep it perfectly. And, just as in vv. 6-9, Paul once again appeals to the OT Scriptures to support his case (cf., v. 10- Deut. 27:26; v. 11- Hab. 2:4; v. 12- Lev. 18:5; v. 13- Deut. 21:23).

The law clearly played a crucial role in the Old Testament. However, Paul’s strong emphasis upon faith coupled with his strong denunciation of works of the law raised a lot of questions in the minds of the Christians in Galatia. For example:

If justification is not by law, then what is the purpose of the law?

Why did God give the law to Israel? What purpose did it play in the history of redemption?

Does the law have a role to play in the believer’s life? If so, what is it?

How does the Christian relate to the law?

How is the Christian to regard the law?

The problem with the Judaizers is that they were merging together two mutually exclusive covenants, the Abrahamic Covenant (gospel) and the Mosaic Covenant (law).

As a result, the article by which the church stands or falls, justification by faith alone, was being undermined. Paul recognized the danger in merging these two mutually exclusive covenants together.

A proper understanding of the law was a matter of great concern to Paul. This is why he devotes a considerable amount of space to set forth a Christian understanding of God's law over against the Judaizer's misunderstanding.

Leon Morris writes,

“...the apostle sets himself to demolish false teaching that he could see was causing great trouble to the church. The law was an important part of the Old Testament. There was no doubting that it was the word of God to his people. But, as Paul saw it, that did not mean that the law had to be observed in precisely the way the Judaizers insisted. He takes time to make it clear that the law gave important teaching, but that in the light of Christ's sacrificial death it must be seen as something quite different from the rule of life that the Jews so easily accepted. To take the Jewish view was to cut the heart out of the Christian system,”
(*Galatians*, p. 92).

Paul's discussion of the danger of mingling the law and faith together in relation to justification highlights an exceedingly important subject, namely the difference between the law and gospel. The doctrine of justification is the chief article of Christian doctrine and second to it is the proper distinguishing of the law and gospel.

C.F.W. Walther in his famous lectures on the law and gospel said, “Indeed the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is the highest art which a person can learn,” (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 43). Martin Luther said, “...place the man who is able nicely to divorce the Law from the Gospel at the head of the list and call him a Doctor of Holy Scripture...,” (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 732).

A. HOW IMPORTANT IS THE DISTINGUISHING OF THE LAW AND GOSPEL?

By way of introduction, I want to give you 6 reasons, which reveal how important it is to distinguish the law and gospel.

1. FAILURE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE LAW AND GOSPEL IS THE PRINCIPLE SOURCE OF THE CORRUPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

Theodore Beza, friend and successor of John Calvin in Geneva, wrote, “We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity,” (*The Christian Faith*, 4.23).

2. PROPERLY DISTINGUISHING THE LAW AND GOSPEL IS A MARK OF A TRUE CHURCH.

In his Commentary on *The Heidelberg Catechism* Zacharias Ursinus noted that, “A profession of the true, pure, and rightly understood doctrine of the law and gospel,” is a mark or sign of a true church (p. 288).

3. PROPERLY DISTINGUISHING THE LAW AND GOSPEL ESTABLISHES COMFORT FOR ONE’S SOUL.

The only source of comfort in one’s daily battle with sin is the imputed righteousness of Christ.

The law does not grant a sinner the imputed righteousness of Christ. The law only rewards inherent righteousness, which the Bible says no man possesses (cf. Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:10). Men are not justified because they are sanctified. This is so easily said but so often not understood.

Justifying righteousness only comes by faith in the gospel. But, when the law and gospel are not properly distinguished, the believer will always confuse the one with the other in the matter of justification.

In other words, blending the law and the gospel causes the believer to ground his hope and comfort partly on the perfect righteousness of Christ and His promises and partly on his own performance and effort to keep the law (i.e., sanctification).

The believer’s life then becomes like the game of “He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not,” in which the unassured lover repeats the phrase, “He loves me, He loves me not,” while picking petals off a flower in hopes that the final petal will be, “He (or she) loves me.”

Just like the unassured lover, the believer is constantly seeking to determine whether he or she is the object of God’s affection and favor. They are hoping that the final petal will be, “God loves me.”

Concerning the paralyzing effects of confounding the law and gospel, the great Scottish preacher, John Colquhoun (ca hoon), writes,

“If he does not know the difference between the law and the gospel he will be apt, especially in the affair of justification, to confound the one with the other. The consequence will be that in his painful experience, bondage will be mixed with liberty of spirit, fear with hope, sorrow with joy, and death with life. If he cannot so distinguish between the gospel from the law as to expect all his salvation from the grace of the gospel, and nothing of it from the works of the law; he will easily be induced to connect his own works with the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the affair of justification. This was the great error of the Judaizing teachers in the churches of Galatia. They mingled the law with the gospel in the business of justification, and thereby they so corrupted the gospel as to alter the very nature of it and make it another gospel,” (*A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, p. 141).

By blending the law and gospel, comfort is always forfeited because for every success, which gives rise for a possibility of hope there is always a failure, which gives rise to greater fear and doubt.

Therefore, we must abandon all reliance upon our obedience and performance in the matter of justification and rest solely upon the righteousness of Christ alone otherwise we relinquish any basis for comfort in our ongoing battle against sin.

4. PROPERLY DISTINGUISHING THE LAW AND GOSPEL SEPARATES CHRISTIANITY FROM ALL OTHER RELIGIONS.

Martin Luther wrote,

“This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation. This is why St. Paul so strongly insists on a clean-cut and proper differentiating of these two doctrines, the Law and the Gospel,” (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 732).

Simply put, whoever teaches or believes that justifying righteousness is obtained “by works of the law” is not a Christian.

What is a Christian? A Christian is simply one who abandons all reliance upon his obedience and receives and rests on Christ alone, who fulfilled all righteousness for him.

All religions share one common denominator: “I obey, therefore I am accepted.” For example, Article 3 in the Articles of Faith in Mormonism says, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, *by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel,*” (emphasis mine). This is a clear mingling of law and gospel. The gospel is not a law! The gospel is a free promise. Obedience is the effect not the cause of justification. We are not justified because we perform works. This is denying Christ (cf. Gal. 2:21).

The Christian faith operates on a totally different principle, which is, *“I am accepted, therefore I obey.”* Sanctification flows out of justification. A man is justified by faith alone. However, he does not remain without works after he has been justified as the Heidelberg Catechism states in Question 64, “It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness,” (Matt. 7:18; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:5).

Michael Horton writes, “Distinguished from all religions, spiritualities, and philosophies of life, the Christian faith is, at its heart, a gospel (meaning “Good News”),” (*The Gospel Driven Life*, p. 11).

5. PROPERLY DISTINGUISHING THE LAW AND GOSPEL IS NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE.

The Lutheran theologian, C.F.W. Walther wrote, “The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scripture, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book,” (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 60).

It is possible to read, study and memorize Scripture and yet miss the whole point.

In John 5:39-40, Jesus speaking to the Jews who sought to kill him says to them, “³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

Properly distinguishing between the law and gospel guards against the impression that the Bible contradicts itself. For example, in Romans 2:13 Paul writes, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” And then in Romans 3:28 he writes, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

A person reads two passages like this and thinks, “Which is it? Is justification by faith alone or by works? Is it perhaps a combination of both? Or, is the Bible full of contradictions?”

But, as soon as a person comes to understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel, the meaning of Scripture becomes perfectly clear.

Martin Luther labored in agony as a devout monk because of his failure to understand the difference between the law and gospel. Listen to him in his own words,

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven... (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 49-50).

6. PROPERLY DISTINGUISHING THE LAW AND GOSPEL GUARDS THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL.

The one truly unique thing the church can give to the world is the gospel. Paul understood this and is the reason why in Galatians 2:5 he says his aim was to preserve the truth of the gospel.

According to Paul, to mingle the law and the gospel is to distort the gospel (Gal. 1:7), to preach another gospel and incur eternal condemnation (Gal. 1:8-9).

To combine the law and gospel is to join the imperfect righteousness of man to the perfect righteousness of Christ as the ground of the sinner’s justification. This, Paul argues, cuts the heart out of the gospel and undermines the very foundation the Christian faith.

CONCLUSION:

For these reasons, we must diligently teach and repeat the distinction between the law and gospel because so few take notice of it and understand it. Admittedly, it is one thing to teach and talk about these things, yet quite another to put them into practice in our daily lives. Therefore, upon reflection remember:

1. WITHOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THIS DISTINCTION (1 COR. 2:14; PS. 119:33).

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

Without the inward illuminating work of the Spirit of God, no man will be able to understand or learn the distinction between the law and gospel. Therefore, we must learn to pray like the Psalmist who prayed, “Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end,” (Ps. 119:33). Augustine also provides help when he prayed, “Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire.”

2. IT IS EASY TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE LAW AND GOSPEL WHEN YOUR HEART DOES NOT CONDEMN YOU.

What do you do when you have blown it and cannot silence the accusing voice within? Listen again to C.F.W. Walther,

“Like two hostile forces, Law and Gospel sometimes clash with each other in a person’s conscience. The Gospel says to him: ‘You have been received into God’s grace.’ The Law says to him: ‘Do not believe it; for look at your past life. How many and grievous are your sins! Examine the thoughts and desires that you have harbored in your mind.’ On an occasion like this it is difficult to divide Law and Gospel. When this happens to a person, he must say to the Law: ‘Away with you! Your demands have all been fully met, and you have nothing to demand of me. There is One who has paid my debt,’” (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 47).

When the law condemns you, you must learn to immediately preach the gospel to yourself.

The law merely shows us what kind of persons we ought to be but provides no power to become it and then condemns us for not being it. But, in the gospel, God gives freely what He demands in the law.

The Law is a sound of terror for sinners but the gospel is a sound of Good News.

The Law sets forth God as a God of wrath and judgment whereas the Gospel sets God forth as a God of love, grace and mercy.

The law sets God forth as a Judge of sinners. The gospel sets God forth as a friend of sinners.

The law sets God forth as “a consuming fire” but the gospel sets God forth as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The law sets forth a throne of judgment. The gospel sets for a throne of grace.

The law issues a sentence of condemnation. The gospel issues a sentence of justification.

The law condemns a sinner for one offense but the gospel justifies a sinner from all his offenses.

In your daily battle with sin, may the Lord grant you grace to learn this high art of distinguishing the law and the gospel!

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