

SONS OF ABRAHAM
PART 7

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:6-14

March 28, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In Pilgrim's Progress, Christian asks Ignorance, "How dost thou believe?"

Listen carefully to Ignorance's answer: "I believe that Christ died for sinners; and that I shall be justified before God from the curse, through His gracious acceptance of my obedience to His law..."

Simply put: Christ + my obedience = Justification (God's acceptance/favor/blessing).

Ignorance was ignorant of the gospel. His ignorance was precisely the error of the Judaizer's false gospel. It wasn't that the Judaizers outright denied Christ. Rather, they minimized and neutralized His uniqueness and sufficiency by combining obedience to the law plus faith in Christ as necessary for justification (cf., 2:21; 5:2).

This is one of the most common and harmful mistakes people make. So many people think they are justified (a recipient of God's favor) because they are sanctified (reached a level of holiness/Godliness). When a man perceives himself most holy, it is then that he wants to be justified by his works.

This kind of reliance on works is the essence of idolatry. Good works (obedience to the law) are simply the effect, not the cause of justification (God pronouncing us righteous). True obedience only flows freely and willingly from a justified heart.

Blending the law and gospel together in the matter of justification, Luther said, does more harm than man's reason can conceive. Paul understood this and is the reason why he separates the law from the gospel as far as heaven and earth are separated. Beginning then in Galatians 3:10ff, Paul sets forth a Christian understanding of the law.

Paul reveals the difference between the law and the gospel. For example, in 3:9, Paul says "those who are of faith are blessed." In 3:10, he says, "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse."

By way of review, last week we asked:

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

In answer to this question, we looked at 6 reasons, which reveal how important it is to distinguish the law and gospel.

We saw that failure to distinguish between the law and gospel:

1. IT IS THE PRINCIPLE SOURCE OF THE CORRUPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.
2. IT IS A MARK OF A TRUE CHURCH.
3. IT ESTABLISHES COMFORT FOR ONE'S SOUL.
4. IT SEPARATES CHRISTIANITY FROM ALL OTHER RELIGIONS.
5. IT IS NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE.
6. IT GUARDS THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL.

Having examined the importance of distinguishing the law and gospel, we must now ask:

B. HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL?

To help you gain a better understanding of Paul's arguments in Galatians 3, we must consider what the law is and then what the gospel is.

1. LAW
 - A. THE LAW IS NATURAL TO MAN (ROM. 1:32; 2:14-15).

God inscribed the law in man's heart in creation. In Romans 1:32, Paul writes, "Though they know God's decree..." (Rom. 1:32). Again, in Romans 2:15, Paul writes that the Gentiles, who do not possess the Law, "... show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them..." (Rom. 2:14-15).

God's Law is written on man's heart. Man was created by God to obey. Man was originally wired for obeying the law. In their pre-Fall state, God provided Adam and Eve with all the necessary abilities to obey and fulfill the commands He had given them.

Man was created in a state of innocence in which he was able to not sin (obey) and able to sin (disobey). Before the Fall there was no conflict between what God commanded and man's responsibility to obey. After the Fall, all men by virtue of their creation still possess to some degree a sense of responsibility to God.

The law is what all men already know inside of themselves. Unless someone possesses a completely seared conscience, most people in our culture still value and quote the Golden Rule. Most people agree that murder, stealing and lying are wrong.

The first thing then that we need to understand about the law is that it comes naturally to us.

B. THE LAW TEACHES US WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO BUT GIVES NO STRENGTH TO DO IT (MATT. 22:37-40; ROM. 7:7-14).

The law gives directions, it specifies and orders what we are to do and forbids what ought to be avoided but supplies no power to carry it out.

The law is like Pharaoh's taskmasters who commanded the children of Israel, "¹⁴ Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?"...¹⁸ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks."

The fault, however, is not in what the law commands for it, Paul says, is "holy and righteous and good," (Rom. 7:12). The fault lies in our fallen hearts. Luther wrote,

In itself the Law is very good, as when a sick man would like to drink wine and foolishly fancies that his health will be restored by it. But the doctor, without casting any reflection on wine, may say: It is impossible for wine to restore your health; on the contrary, it will make the sickness worse. There he is not finding fault with wine but with the foolish confidence of the sick man. The man will need a different remedy to restore his health that he may drink wine. Thus also corrupt nature needs a cure different from that of the Law- a cure by which health may be restored that the Law may be fulfilled, (Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 756).

The law reveals but does not cause sin. In Romans 7:7-14, Paul reveals that a man's corrupt heart burns for sin the more it is reproved and threatened. The reason for this is because an unloving heart hates to be told to love. The law only prescribes love but cannot create a loving heart. This is why a steady diet of secrets, steps and principles do not make people better or aid them in achieving anything. Before a man can ever hope to love, thus fulfilling the law (Rom. 13:10), he must first have a loving heart. A loving heart is a proper effect of the gospel, which is the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:8). The law then sets forth the obedience and perfect righteousness we owe to God and our neighbor but supplies neither.

Jesus summarizes the requirements of God's law in Matthew 22:37-40:

³⁷ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

It is common to hear others quote The Great Commandment as if it is good news and the essence of Christianity. They think that the Old Testament was hard because there were so many laws. But, in the New Testament, all God requires is for us to love Him and other people.

The Great Commandment is certainly important but it is not good news! We must keep in mind that the Great Commandment is not the Great Promise. Listen to what John Calvin said about those who think that instead of following a lot of rules, God only expects us to love, “As if we could think of anything more difficult than to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength! Compared with this law, everything ought to be considered easy,” (*Institutes*, 2.8.57).

Paul, like Jesus, relates all of God’s commandments to the rule of love. What then does it look like to be a loving person (i.e., to love God and one’s neighbor)? Let’s look briefly at the 1st and 6th Commandments:

The 1st commandment reveals what it looks like to love God. What does the LORD forbid and require in the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me,” (Ex. 20:3)? Let me give you a brief summary from the Heidelberg Catechism.

In brief, God forbids idolatry. Idolatry is putting your trust in something other than or in addition to God. So, for example, reliance on works of the law for justification is idolatry because it is man bringing his achievement before God and relying on it rather than on Christ and His achievement.

And on the flip side, God requires us in the 1st commandment to come to a right knowledge of the only true God, to trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honor Him with our whole heart.

This is one example of what it looks like to love God. What does it look like to love people?

The 6th commandment reveals what looks like to love others? What does the LORD forbid and require in the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” (Ex. 20:13)?

Again, listen to a summary from the Heidelberg Catechism. The 6th commandment forbids us to dishonor, hate, injure, or kill our neighbor by our thoughts, words, gestures, and deeds, whether personally or through someone else. It forbids all envy, hatred, anger, and desire for revenge and instructs us to not harm or recklessly endanger ourselves.

On the flip side, the 6th commandment requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves by showing patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him and to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

Where do we find such a loving person? Listen to Ecclesiastes 7:20, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” In Acts 15:10, Peter says the law is a yoke or burden “that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

There has only been one perfectly loving and righteous man who lived and never sinned, Jesus! In terms of love to God, Jesus said, “I always do the things that are pleasing to

Him,” (Jn. 8:29). In terms of loving men, John writes, “...having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end,” (Jn. 13:1). Jesus is the embodiment and fulfillment of the law.

- C. THE LAW PROMISES LIFE UPON THE CONDITION OF PERFECT, PERPETUAL OBEDIENCE AND THREATENS CURSING FOR DISOBEDIENCE (GEN. 2:16-17; DEUT. 30:15-20; GAL. 3:10; JAM. 2:10).

Note carefully: The promises in the law operate differently from the promises of the gospel. The law can be summarized like this: “Do this and live,” or “Disobey this and be condemned.”

After the Fall God’s law remained in force and all men remained under obligation to obey His law. However, as a result of the Fall, man lost the ability to obey (power not to sin; Augustine, *posse non peccare*) but retained the ability to disobey (power to sin; Augustine, *posse peccare*).

Therefore, justification by works of the law became impossible because man no longer had the power to obey God’s law.

Paul, in Romans 8:7-8, writes, “⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Because of this hostility and inability, the law now serves to reveal sin and issue a sentence of condemnation. The purpose of the law is not to give life (cf. Gal. 3:21) or to make us good and thereby obtain God’s blessing, love and favor.

Paul, in Romans 3:20 writes, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The purpose of the law after the Fall is to act like a mirror and disclose to us our sin. The law gives knowledge but generates no power! It convicts us of what we ought to be and declares us guilty because we are not what we ought to be and thus sentences all men to eternal condemnation.

The major proposition in the voice of the law is: “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,” (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26).

The law does, however, serve the interests of the gospel. How? Listen to Paul in Galatians 3:21-22, “²¹ For, if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture (law-J.F.) imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

“...the law,” writes Luther, “makes troubled hearts thirst for Christ,” (Plass, p. 759). And to the thirsty, Jesus calls, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink,” (Jn. 7:37).

The law then imprisons a man and drives him to recognize the hopelessness of his predicament, which is his failure and inability to perfectly keep the righteous requirements of the law (i.e., he is not a loving person). In seeing and feeling condemnation, the convicted, guilt-laden sinner is driven to embrace Christ by faith, who alone is our justification and righteousness.

Augustine wrote, “The usefulness of the law lies in convicting man of his infirmity and moving him to call upon the remedy of grace which is in Christ,” (*Institutes*, 2.7.9.).

Again, “The law was given for this purpose: to make you, being great, little; to show that you do not have in yourself the strength to attain righteousness, and for you, thus helpless, unworthy, and destitute, to flee to grace,” (*ibid*, 2.7.9.).

CONCLUSION:

What have we learned concerning the law?

In brief, because of sin, man in his fallen state no longer possesses the ability to obey what God has commanded. Therefore, the law’s promise of life/justification is no longer attainable. This is why Paul denounces justification by works of the law.

No man will be able to stand guiltless before God on the basis of his own inherent righteousness because man no longer has the ability to perfectly obey what God has commanded. All, then, who rely on works of the law fall under the law’s curse (Gal. 3:10). This is why Paul refers to the law as a ministry of death in 2 Corinthians 3:7.

This is man’s predicament. By nature and revelation we hear the voice of the law, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,” (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26).

Our conscience reminds and affirms in us: “I have not abided by and done all things that are written in the law. I have not been a perfectly loving person.” The only conclusion is “I am condemned.”

Unless the consolation of the gospel is brought to bear, only grief and despair will characterize one’s life. But, the convicting power of the law is not intended to leave us in utter despair but rather to lead us to Christ (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.8). Paul writes in Romans 10:4, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” John Calvin writes,

For God’s mercy is revealed in Christ to all who seek and wait upon it with true faith. In the precepts of the law, God is but the rewarder of perfect righteousness, which all of us lack, and conversely, the severe judge of evil deeds. But in Christ His face shines, full of grace and gentleness, even upon us poor and unworthy sinners, (*Institutes*, 2.7.8.).

When the law has performed its work and accomplished its purpose in us, it must give place to Jesus, who is the fulfiller and accomplisher of the law. Because Christ is the end of the law, let every believer, when they read, hear and feel the crushing weight of the law's curse, not think that it belongs to them anymore.

The curse and condemnation of the law no more belongs to the believer than an Al Qaeda terrorist belongs in the Oval office. Paul, in Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

As justified believers, we must continually set before our eyes the gospel, which announces the joyful news of Christ, the comforting promises of God, the forgiveness of sins, grace, redemption and freedom. In this way, believers can remove all fear of the law's sentence of judgment and condemnation.

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville.