

WHY THEN THE LAW? PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:19-22

August 22, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, Paul argues for the greater glory of the gospel over the Mosaic Covenant. Here in Galatians 3, he is showing the lesser glory of the Mosaic Covenant in comparison to the greater glory of the promise God made to Abraham.

In the preceding section, 3:15-18, Paul gave 4 reasons why the Promise is superior to the Law. In this new section (vv. 19-25), Paul now emphasizes 5 reasons why the Law (Mosaic Covenant) is inferior to God's Promise (the Abrahamic covenant of promise).

By showing the inferiority of the Law in relation to the promise, Paul sets forth the Law's proper purpose and keeps it within its lawful function and use. Because the Law is inferior to God's promise, the question that naturally arises is:

“If the Law doesn't justify why did God give the Law? Why was it necessary for God to give the Law?”

The first reason we saw last week was:

I. THE LAW WAS ADDED TO REVEAL SIN. V. 19A

God gave the Law to expose our sin for what it really is, namely a transgression (overstepping) of God's holy and righteous Law. The Law exposes our sin and brings it out into the open. It increases our guilt and reveals our misery.

Before moving on, this first use of the Law raises an important point about discipleship and the effects of a law-driven life.

There is no question that the duties of discipleship are important to the Christian life. In other words obedience, the pursuit of holiness and serving/using one's gift are a necessary part of being a Christian.

But there is something of paramount importance needed that provides the necessary motivation and atmosphere in which discipleship can be practiced. This necessary ingredient is the gospel.

As Jerry Bridges has written, the one word that describes what Christians need to hear most for discipleship is the Gospel (see *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 20)! The most critical

word you must hear from God moment by moment and day-by-day is the gospel's declaration of "YES!" over your life (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

However, if your Christian life is organized and driven by purposes or consists of a steady diet of imperatives, moral challenge, exhortation on pursuing spiritual disciplines, admonishment to pursue holiness, etc... your discipleship will be derailed.

God did not give the Law to drive discipleship but to reveal its demands. The Law doesn't make us love God or our neighbor it just tells us that this is our duty. In fact, a law-driven life destroys intimacy with God and eventually produces hatred of God.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther notes that before a man is confronted with the spiritual extent of the demands of God's Law, "...there was no trouble, he was a big saint; he worshipped and praised God, genuflected, and gave thanks, as that Pharisee did in Luke (18:1). But now that sin and death have been revealed, he would want God not to exist. In this way the Law produces extreme hate toward God," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 314).

Only a gospel-informed/driven life produces genuine love for God and authentic discipleship. The gospel is what encourages (drives) you to obey God and pursue holiness. You simply cannot and will not love God or obey His Law if you are not constantly receiving the comfort of the gospel.

The Law brings no comfort. The Law only exposes, breaks, bruise, crushes and shatters our presumption of righteousness. The Law tells us what our duties of discipleship are but provides no power to carry them out.

The essence and strategy for discipleship is to help people lay hold of the comfort of the gospel not only at the beginning of their Christian lives but throughout their Christian lives!

In 1 Corinthians 1:20, Paul writes "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory."

In view of discipleship, we might say, "...all the promises of God find their YES! in Him. That is why we sing, worship, pursue holiness, obey, serve, practice spiritual disciplines, etc...

So, the most important thing we need to hear as Christians for growth is Good News. Jerry Bridges in his book, *The Discipline of Grace*, writes,

"It is only the joy of hearing the gospel and being reminded that our sins are forgiven in Christ that will keep the demands of discipleship from becoming drudgery. It is only gratitude and love to God that comes from knowing that He no longer counts our sins against us (Romans 4:8) that provides the proper motive for responding to the claims of discipleship," (p. 21).

In the issue of justification one must remove the Law from sight and look only to the promise. Paul in Galatians 3:18 writes, "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, we must never look to our performance even as Christians as that which endears us to God. This is critical for sanctification.

Even as Christian, our best works are stained and defiled with sin. Our best works, in comparison to the perfect works of Jesus, are imperfect. Our performance will never match the performance of Christ, who said, "I always do the things that are pleasing to Him," (Jn. 8:29).

The Law, then, serves this pedagogical function of exposing our sin for what it is (i.e., transgression) and bringing it into the open in order to drive us continually to Christ. The Law serves to make the vital necessity of Christ clear to us. "Therefore," writes Martin Luther, "the Law is a minister and a preparation for grace," (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 314*).

The bad news revealed in the Law is intended to lead us to the good news revealed in the Promise. Thomas Watson, in his book, *The Doctrine of Repentance*, wrote, "A broken heart and a broken Christ do well agree. The more bitterness we taste in sin, the more sweetness we shall taste in Christ," (p. 27).

Until the problem is clearly revealed we will not seek the solution, Christ. But, the more we see of our sinfulness the more we cling to Christ as our only remedy, not as a one-time event but throughout our entire Christian lives! Q. 115 of the Heidelberg Catechism reads:

"If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?"

A. First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ."

The Judaizers, along with unbelieving Israelites, misunderstood this purpose of the Mosaic Covenant. They thought they could secure their salvation by their obedience to it rather than by faith in the promise. But, the purpose of the Law, in contrast to the Judaizers' position, was not to bring about salvation and blessing by one's obedience to it.

Rather, the purpose of the Mosaic Law was to reveal transgression and drive Israel to Christ, who was offered in the Promise. Jerry Bridges summarizes what we are saying about discipleship when he writes,

“Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God’s grace,” (*Discipline of Grace*, p. 18).

Every day in as we are pursuing a life of discipleship, we must remember that we relate to God not on the basis of our performance but on the basis of His promise. If we related to God on the basis of our performance rather than His promise, our blessings would not just be meager they would be non-existent!

Why? The Law only issues blessings to those who keep it perfectly. Otherwise, the Law issues cursings (cf. Gal. 3:10, 12).

The Good News of the gospel, however, tells us that Christ has borne the curses of the Law for our disobedience and has earned for us the blessings of the Law for His perfect obedience. The cause and ground (basis) of our justification before God is the righteousness and obedience of Christ imputed to us by God Himself!

The staggering truth of imputation is this:

The righteousness that is counted to us is the perfect obedience of Christ rendered in our name to God the Father.

In other words, because God credits us with the perfect obedience of His Son, our standing before God will never be more righteous in eternity future than the first day we trusted Christ. In Romans 5:2, Paul writes that “Through Him (Christ-J.F.) we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand...” Our standing before God can never change. From now and throughout eternity, will stand before God, justified (just as if we have never sinned and just as if we have always obeyed) because of the imputed righteousness of Christ alone!

Even though justification is a point-in-time event that occurs in the past, we must come to see it also as an ongoing present-day reality in which we are to live and rejoice in ever day. We are called to rejoice in a sense of acceptance and glory in the experience of grace!

Only a continual hearing of the gospel will keep us from falling into thinking that our daily relationship with God is based on how good or bad we have performed. Paul renounced all confidence in his own performance, whether good or bad, and daily looked to Christ alone for his sense of acceptance and favor before God.

The gospel is not a one-time message but a life-time message that we must repeatedly preach to ourselves again and again.

Coming back now to Paul’s first argument, he says that the Law was added for the purpose of clearly revealing sin. We must learn this proper function of the law so that we learn to use it lawfully in our daily pursuit of the duties of discipleship. This doesn’t

mean that the purpose of the Law is bad. It just means that it is different from and inferior to the purpose of the Promise.

The Law is inferior to the promise because all the Law can do is reveal sin as transgression but it cannot and does not provide salvation because this is not the purpose for why God added the Mosaic Covenant.

A second reason the Mosaic Covenant is inferior to the Abrahamic Covenant of promise is because:

LESSON:

II. THE LAW WAS ORDAINED THROUGH MEDIATION. vv. 19B-20

The setting in which God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai was awesome and terrifying.

In Exodus 19, Moses records how God gave the Law in a thick cloud, with thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, earthquakes and loud trumpets (cf. vv. 12-13, 16, 18-19, 21-24). Everyone knows what it is like to experience the awesome power of a thunderstorm. But it is hard to imagine such a frightening scene in which Moses received the Law.

In addition to these fearful phenomena that accompanied the giving of the Law, Paul says that angels were also present.

Even though angels are not mentioned in Exodus 19, Moses, in Deuteronomy 33:2, reveals that the Law was given amidst a myriad of angels, “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; He shone forth from Mount Paran; He came from *the ten thousands of holy ones*, with flaming fire at His right hand (or “From His right hand came a fiery law for them,” NKJV; emphasis mine).

Thousands of angels were not only present, but they also acted as God’s instruments through which the Law was given to Moses. In Acts 7:38, 53 in his sermon to the Jewish leaders, Stephen confirmed that angels delivered the Law to Moses, “you who received the law as delivered by angels...” The author of Hebrews also confirms the presence and ministry of angels in the giving of the Law. In 2:2, the author writes, “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable...,” (cf. Ps. 68:18).

Why were angels present and why did God use them as His instruments to deliver the Law?

Herman Witsius suggests three purposes.

First, the presence of thousands of angels added to the terrifying phenomena that accompanied the giving of the Law and they acted as witnesses.

Witsius writes, “It is certain, that, with their heavenly choirs they surrounded the mount, and added to the majestic pomp of the Lawgiver” and act as “witnesses of all that was transacted,” (*The Economy of the Covenants*, vol. II, p. 165).

Second, angels were present in order to make the thunderous voice of God intelligible.

Witsius writes,

“It is not improbable, that the sound of those words, in which the Law was conceived, was formed in the air by the means of angels. For, God properly uses not a voice: this is a degree of imperfection: but yet it is called the voice of God, formed in the air in some extraordinary manner, to express the mind of God, for which purpose He uses the ministry of angels: namely, the Law was given in thunder and lightning: the thunder indeed, which formed the matter of the voice, which proclaimed the words of the Law, must certainly have had an articulation, superadded which was framed by the means of angels...the thunder, in which God spoke, was produced by the means of angels, and articulated into words intelligible to man,” (Ibid, pp. 165-166).

Third, the angels acted as God’s special couriers.

Instead of God directly giving the Law to Moses, the angels delivered the Law.

Witsius writes, “...the tables of testimony, on which the Law was written by the finger of God, were delivered to Moses by the intervention of angels, (Ibid, p. 166).

Note that Paul doesn’t say the angels are the source of the Law. God is the source and author of the Law (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 5:22). Rather, the angels acted as God’s instruments so that when God gave the Law to Moses, He did so through the instrumentality of angels.

Why does Paul emphasize this point about angels?

The Judaizers, perhaps, were making the argument that the presence of angels added to the superiority of the Law. Paul, however, argues against this. He says the presence of the mediating ministry of angels did not enhance the Law but rather contributed to its inferiority.

In fact, the Law was given through two sets of mediators. First, God gave the Law to Moses through the mediation of angels. Second, God gave the Law to the people of Israel through the mediation of Moses. In v. 19, Paul writes that the Law “was put in place through angels *by an intermediary*,” (i.e., Moses; emphasis mine).

Moses was the other minister of God at the giving of the Law. He was the mediator of the Law to the people. When He received the tables of the Law, he carried them to the people (cf. Ex. 34:29).

The point Paul is making is the fact that a mediator (in this case two) was involved in the giving of the Mosaic Covenant indicates that two parties are involved (cf. Deut. 5:5). Thus, the mediation, which indicates that two parties are involved, witnessed to the Law's conditional nature (cf., Fung, *Galatians*, p. 162).

It is precisely because the Law was conditional that it is inferior to the promise. Paul brings this point out further in v. 20 when he says, "Now an intermediary implies more than one (i.e., party-J.F.), but God is one" (i.e., one party- J.F.). J.B. Phillips' paraphrase of v. 20 reads, "For the promise of God needs neither angelic witness nor any intermediary but depends on Him alone," (*The New Testament in Modern English*, p. 394).

Specific obligations are placed on both parties in the Mosaic Covenant (the people and God). Paul revealed the obligation of this conditional covenant in v. 12 when he quotes Leviticus 18:5, "the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."

The Mosaic Covenant was a, "Do this and Live," covenant. Man was obligated to obey and in return God would grant life (i.e., an entitlement to heaven, see Bryan Estelle, *The Law is not of Faith*, p. 118).

The only problem (thus the reason for the inferiority of the Law) is that man could not keep His part due to sin, which the Law was given to reveal. Therefore, God was under no obligation to give life. The one who failed to perfectly fulfill the obligations of the covenant fell under the curse of the Law (3:10).

Bryan Estelle commenting on Paul's reference to Leviticus 18:5 writes, "Entitlement to heaven can be secured only by grace through faith, not works, not mere human works, that is," (*The Law Is Not Of Faith*, p. 145).

The Abrahamic covenant of promise, however, was exactly opposite. God spoke the promise directly to Abraham without any intervening means. The promise of God didn't need either angels or Moses to act as intermediaries but depended on God alone.

This absence of mediation in the Abrahamic Covenant indicated that only one party was involved and witnessed to its unconditional nature. Abraham was not a party in the Covenant of Promise. Paul says "God is one," (i.e., He was the only party involved in making the covenant with Abraham).

Abraham played no part in making or keeping the covenant of promise. No obligations were imposed upon Abraham. He was merely a recipient of its blessings.

The fulfillment of the conditions of the Covenant of Promise lay on the divine side. God, the Great King, walked alone through the severed halves of the animals (cf. Gen. 15:17).

God, Himself, made a one-sided promise to personally perform all of the conditions of the covenant and to suffer all the curses for its violation. Because God obligates Himself to fulfill all the conditions of the covenant, He freely bestows the inheritance upon Abraham on the basis of His own performance.

So, whereas entitlement to heaven could only be secured by human works in the Mosaic Covenant (Gal. 3:12), Abraham's entitlement to heaven is secured by divine works and is received by grace through faith alone in the promise.

This distinction is why the Law is inferior to the promise. What man could not accomplish in obedience to the Law, God has accomplished unilaterally by His own eternal, unchangeable promise, for God is a party of one.

REFLECTION:

As we think on Paul's second argument, the implications for our lives are simply amazing.

1. GOD'S VOICE IN THE LAW APART FROM CHRIST IS DANGEROUS.

The voice of God in Law is terrifying to a sinner. We must take notice that God's full presence in Law is overwhelming to finite humans and terrifying to the consciences of sinful men. Apart from Christ, who brings us God's presence in peace, God is very dangerous and scary.

For example, in Exodus 19:12, God instructed Moses, "set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.'"

The Law sets limits on the sinner's approach to God. It warns the sinner, "Do not come near!" But, the glory of the gospel is that it opens a way of immediate, direct access to God! Because of Christ, Paul writes, "...we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him," (Eph. 3:12, cf. Eph. 2:18; Rom. 5:2; Heb. 4:16).

In Deuteronomy 5:23-26 Moses reminds the people of Israel,

“²³ ...as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. ²⁴ And you said, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. ²⁵ Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. ²⁶ For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived?’”

Jeremiah describes the voice of God in the Law as like a fire and a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces (23:29). The voice of God in the Law burns the straw of self-righteousness from our lives and like a hammer shatters our sinful hearts, which have transgressed His Law.

Deuteronomy 4:24 says, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” Echoing the words of Moses, Hebrews 12:29 states, “...our God is a consuming fire.”

A few verses earlier in 12:19-21, the author of Hebrews says that the voice of God in Law at Mt. Sinai made the hearers “¹⁹...beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’”

This is Paul’s point: “How could the Law justify when the Law’s whole purpose was to cause people to tremble and be terrified at the sound of the Law,” (see *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 320). Thus, in comparison to the Promise, the Law is inferior.

In CS Lewis’ book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, upon first hearing about Aslan, asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is safe.

Lewis’ reply is quite insightful:

‘If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than me or else just silly.’

‘Then he isn’t safe?’ asked Lucy.

‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver. ‘Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you,’ (pp. 75-76).

This is our hope!

2. GOD’S VOICE IN THE GOSPEL WITH CHRIST IS SAFE.

Our Great King’s voice in the Law apart from Christ isn’t safe! But, the voice of God in the gospel is comforting to a sinner.

The Mosaic Covenant offered no ground for hope or comfort to the despairing sinner although it did point to the promise. But the Abrahamic Covenant of promise offered great hope and comfort.

Deuteronomy 4:30-31 highlights this point, “³⁰ When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey

His voice. ³¹ For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that He swore to them.”

Sinners who know they are guilty of breaking God’s Law will repent and turn back to God because they are assured that God is a merciful God. The gospel assures sinners that God will not leave them or destroy precisely because He will not forget the covenant (i.e., Abrahamic Covenant) that He swore to fulfill.

Because God is unchangeable and eternally faithful to His promise, we have great comfort and assurance that He is safe. William Perkins wrote, “God’s unchangeableness is the foundation of our comfort,” (*Galatians*, p. 193).

We do not have to tremble with fear like Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai because God does not forget the covenant that He swore. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God swears by Himself to personally perform all of the conditions and suffer all of the curses for its violation! By virtue of the Great King’s performance, our inheritance is freely bestowed upon us.

Instead employing inferior mediators, God in Christ, gave Himself as our Mediator (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). Moses was the mediator of Law but Christ is the Mediator of Good News! Whereas the Law was mediated through God’s servants, the gospel was given directly by God, the Servant! The gospel assures trembling sinners that God is safe!

The author of Hebrews in 12:18-24 writes these assuring words,

“¹⁸...you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

© 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.