

WHY THEN THE LAW? PART 4

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:19-22

September 5, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In vv. 19-22, Paul gives 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.

Thus far we have seen how the Law is inferior to the promise because:

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

The Law could reveal sin but could not take it away.

II. The Law was Ordained through Mediation. vv. 19c-20

The two-fold mediation of angels and Moses indicated there were two parties involved, which witnessed to the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant.

Unlike the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15; see also 2 Sam. 7:1-16; Jer. 31:31-37; Ezek. 36:22-32), the Mosaic Covenant provided no fulfillment for what it demanded.

The Lord swore no promise that obligated Him to perform all the conditions or suffer all of the curses set forth in the Mosaic Covenant.

Unlike the Abrahamic Covenant, the Lord swore no unilateral oath that bound Him to keep the Mosaic Covenant regardless of the people's performance.

In fact, the obligation of fulfillment as well as the suffering of all the curses lay personally with the people (e.g., Ex 19:8; 24:3-8).

III. THE LAW WAS TEMPORARY. V. 19B

A. THE LAW WAS TEMPORARY IN ITS DURATION. V. 19B

The Mosaic Covenant had a beginning point (Mt. Sinai) and an ending point (Mt. Calvary).

Second,

B. THE LAW WAS TEMPORARY IN ITS FUNCTION. V. 19B

In terms of the history of salvation, the Mosaic Covenant served a temporary, subservient function to the Abrahamic Covenant.

The temporary nature of the Mosaic Covenant raises an important question for us:

REFLECTION:

Since the Mosaic Covenant was temporary, does the Law have any place or role in our daily lives as Christians? If so, what? The answer is both yes and no. We must make a distinction between the eternal moral law of God and the temporary Mosaic Covenant of Law.

First, the answer is no. The Mosaic Covenant in terms of the *history of salvation* is now obsolete and no longer binding upon us. The civil and ceremonial laws, which pertained only to the theocracy of Israel, no longer pertain to us. The Mosaic Covenant has no more binding authority or directives upon our lives than for example the Russian constitution does for us.

However, the moral demands of God's law have not passed away. God's moral law neither began nor ended with the Mosaic Covenant. The moral law of God is eternal and unchanging because it is an expression of God's unchanging, eternal, just, holy and righteous character.

So, in terms of the *order of salvation*, the moral law (not the Mosaic Covenant) continues to play an important role in our lives as Christians.

What role then does it play?

1. THE MORAL LAW, LIKE THE MOSAIC COVENANT, EXPOSES OUR SIN AS TRANSGRESSIONS AND DRIVES US TO CHRIST.

The Heidelberg Catechism in Q. 115 asks:

“If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?”

Here's the first answer:

“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.”

2. THE MORAL LAW GUIDES US IN OUR DAILY LIVES.

The moral law continually reminds us of our duty toward God and our neighbor (e.g., Matt. 22:37-40; Eph. 4:25-32).

3. THE MORAL LAW DIRECTS US TO RELY UPON THE ENABLING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

The moral law drives us to depend upon the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to perceive the reality and sufficiency of Christ, crucified and risen, both for justification and sanctification. It drives us to Holy Spirit reliant rather than self-reliant.

Obedience to God does not come from sheer willpower or discipline. Those who think they can obey God's law in their own strength have never been truly humbled and brought to an understanding of the sinfulness of their heart and their moral inability.

Even as believers, we are still prone to depend upon our own strength rather than the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Realizing our legal tendency to default back to our own resources, the Heidelberg Catechism provides a second answer in Q. 115. Why does God continue to have the moral law preached so strictly to believers? The Heidelberg Catechism answers, "Second that we may be zealous for good deeds and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection."

The law then plays an important role in our lives because it constantly drives us to live in dependence upon the Holy Spirit and to pray to God for the Spirit's enabling power.

Having acknowledged a continuing role of the law in our daily lives, there is a very important point we must remember about it. Because of Christ's work for us, the accusing function of the moral law works differently for the Christian than it does for the unbeliever.

Samuel Bolton wrote,

"We take the law as the image of the will of God which we desire to obey, but from which we do not expect life and favour, neither do we fear death and rigour (severity/harshness- J.F.)... For believers, the law is abrogated in respect of its power to justify or condemn; but it remains in full force to direct us in our lives. *It condemns sin in the faithful, though it cannot condemn the faithful for sin,*" (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 58; emphasis mine).

Though the moral law of God still retains the authority to direct us, it no longer has any power to condemn us for our failures! Though we are still under its commands we are no longer subject to its curses!

How can this be? Paul, in Galatians 3:13, declares "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."

The justifying waters of Calvary have quenched the flaming arrows of the law, which pierce our conscience. We are no longer under condemnation, as Paul declares in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

By grace through faith alone, God imputes to the sinner the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ (cf. HC. Q. 60).

As a result, we are as righteous before God as Christ is! Because of these great gospel benefits, it is as if we have never had nor committed any sin. And, it is as if we ourselves had accomplished all the obedience, which Christ has rendered for us. This is good news!

The implications of this gospel truth for our daily lives are staggering.

To begin with, because all men are born under a “do this and live” mentality, everyone is naturally prone to think that God’s favor and all good things which come from Him depend upon obedience to the law (i.e., our performance).

As a result of this legal mentality, we often go about our daily lives with apprehension, lack of assurance and fear that we as well as our good works are never really approved by God. And so we walk around living defeated lives, paralyzed by a constant sense of failure and remorse.

But, because God imputes to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, this means that our obedience is also acceptable to God. The blood of Christ shed on the Cross is the satisfaction on account of which God receives us, as well as our works, into His favor.

It is the “blood of Jesus,” John says, that “cleanses us from all sin,” (1 Jn. 1:7). In Romans 3:24, Paul says we “are justified by His grace as a gift, *through the redemption* that is in Christ Jesus...,” (emphasis mine).

The holiness of Christ’s human nature was necessary to His obedience. For Jesus to be our Mediator, He had to be holy and righteous in Himself so that He might be able to perform perfect obedience, and make satisfaction for us (see Herman Witsius, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 328).

Christ’s obedience, performed out of perfect holiness and righteousness, and satisfaction, rendered on the cross, are the ground upon which God is pleased with us as well as our works.

Therefore, the Belgic Confession in Article 24 states that all our good works, which proceed from the root of faith, are good and acceptable to God, because they are all sanctified by His grace. Amen!

Without this assurance of the justification of our works we would always be in doubt, tossed back and forth without any certainty as to whether God accepts our works or us.

We would be paralyzed by a performance-driven mentality. Our conscience would be tormented constantly if it rested upon our performance rather than upon the merit of the obedience, suffering and death of our Savior (see *Belgic Confession*, Art. 24).

Since then we have been set free from the curse of the law and God has imputed to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ, I want to mention two benefits of this good news for our daily lives:

1. WE ARE NOW FREE TO OBEY THE LAW FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OUR LIVES.

Michael Horton writes, “We have been set free from the personal obligation of fulfilling the law as a condition for eternal life so that, freed from its curse, we can be liberated for the first time to truly love and serve others, which is to obey the law in its deepest intent,” (*God of Promise*, p. 181).

Second, because we have been freed from the curse of the Law:

2. WE CAN LIVE OUR LIVES WITH CONFIDENCE AND JOY.

Wilhem Niesel observes, “If we enjoy union with Christ, not only we ourselves but even our works too are just in God’s sight. This doctrine of the justification of works...is of the greatest consequences for ethics. It makes clear that the man who belongs to Christ need not be the prey of continual remorse. On the contrary he can go about his daily work confidently and joyfully,” (*God of Promise*, p. 109).

Calvin taught this exact point in his Institutes. He taught that our works as believers are acceptable to God precisely because our sins have been released from the curse of the Law and we have been brought into union with Christ (3.17.10). Calvin writes,

“Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God’s sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is *buried in Christ’s purity, and is not charged to our account*. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified,” (3.17.10; emphasis mine).

This is good news! Jesus was the true law-keeper. He said, “I delight to do your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart,” (Ps. 40:8; Heb. 10:7). Jesus is the faithful covenant-keeping partner of God. Graeme Goldsworthy writes, “He justifies our failed attempts to be lawful by His infallible lawfulness,” (*Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, p. 172).

Thomas Watson in his book, *The Ten Commandments*, writes the following concerning our works as believers,

“He will see the faith, and pass by the failing. The gospel remits the severity of the moral law. Wherein our personal obedience comes short, God will be pleased to accept us in our Surety. ‘He hath made us accepted in the Beloved.’ Eph. 1:6. Though our obedience be imperfect, yet, through Christ our Surety, God looks upon it as perfect. That very service which God’s law might condemn, His mercy is pleased to crown, by virtue of the blood of our Mediator” (p. 47).

When it comes to our Christian lives, we must never leave behind the doctrine of justification, as if it was a point-in-time occurrence in our past that has no relevance to our present walk.

Understanding that God has not only justified our standing but also our works frees us from a “works/performance” oriented mentality. Ever since the Fall, God has never purposed that we relate to Him directly on the basis of a “Do this and live” covenant.

Our performance will never be good enough to be approved by God. The only way we can relate to God is through the perfect performance (righteousness) of Christ alone.

So, for example, when it comes to our duty in prayer, Jerry Bridges points out,

“When we pray to God for His blessing, He does not examine our performance to see if we are worthy. Rather, He looks to see if we are trusting in the merit of His Son as our only hope for securing His blessing. To repeat: We are saved by grace, and we are to live by grace every day of our Christian lives,” (*The Discipline of Grace*, p. 19).

Consequently, thoughts such as, “I’m not good enough,” “I’m not worthy,” “God must be displeased with me,” “Surely, God will not bless me,” and so forth have no place in the Christian life. Such thinking isn’t humility but rather evidence of unbelief. It is evidence of a performance/works mentality rather than a gospel mentality.

Because of Christ’s ministry of Intercession for the believer, Article 26 in the Belgic Confession states,

“We should not plead here that we are unworthy- for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own dignity but only on the basis of the excellence and dignity of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith. Since the apostle for good reason wants us to get rid of this foolish fear-- or rather, this unbelief-- he says to us that Jesus Christ was "made like His brothers in all things," that He might be a high priest who is merciful and faithful to purify the sins of the people.”

Since we have been justified (Rom. 5:1), we do not have to fall into the trap of the enemy who tempts us into thinking that our favor with God is earned or forfeited based upon our performance.

Because we are in union with Christ, our imperfect works are “buried in Christ’s purity” and “not charged to our account.” Therefore, we have the assurance that we, as well as our works, are acceptable to God!

This is freedom! This is good news! No more remorse, fear, reluctance, lack of assurance or apprehension. We can go forth in our daily lives with confidence and joy, knowing that we as well as our works (performance) are accepted by God because of Christ.

This is the gospel truth that motivates and empowers us to obey and persevere in our daily lives as Christians! And, this is the good news that is confirmed to us in the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper is not a sign and seal of a “Do this and Live” covenant (i.e., a covenant of law). Rather, the Lord’s Supper is a sign and seal of a “Live, now do this!” covenant (i.e., a covenant of grace).

The Lord’s Supper confirms and assures us that God approves of us as well as our works. It confirms and strengthens our faith by assuring us that the gospel removes the severity and condemnation of the moral law.

By it, we are assured that where our personal obedience comes short, God is pleased to accept us in Christ, since “He has blessed us in the Beloved,” (Eph. 1:6). The Lord’s Supper strengthens our faith by confirming to us that even though our obedience is imperfect, through Christ, God looks upon it as perfect.

Christ summons us to gather around His table and receive the assurance of His favor toward us. The Lord’s Supper is a permanent confirmation of God’s peace treaty with His people (see Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, p. 119).

This sacrament assures us that God comes to us in peace and not judgment. It assures our anxious hearts that even though God’s Law continues to condemn our sin, it cannot condemn us!

Because you, as well as your works, are approved by God because of Christ alone, you can come to His table this morning with confidence and joy in the full assurance of God’s goodwill and favor toward you.

The good news is that we can come with confidence and joy but not with presumption (i.e., a presumption of righteousness). We must examine ourselves to make sure we come in a worthy manner to the Lord’s Table.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-31, Paul gives a strong warning against partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. This is what the apostle writes,

“²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let

a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”

None of us will ever come to the Lord’s Table perfect, free from sin. And so in this sense, there is nothing we can do in order to make ourselves “worthy.” What makes us worthy is what God does, His actions to us: namely, His giving the gift of Christ and all of His benefits to us. Therefore, the best and only kind of worthiness we can bring to God is to acknowledge our unworthiness to Him so that His mercy may make us worthy of Him (see John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.41-42).

And so it is with humility and gratitude that we come to Christ’s Table today in order to be served by our Lord and Servant. We do not presume to come to His Table in our own self-righteousness. Rather, we come trusting in His righteousness, for none of us our worthy in and of ourselves to approach our God who is a consuming fire.

It is only through Christ that we have confidence to enter God’s presence by our Savior’s blood, which He opened up for us through the His death on the cross.

So, come today and receive assurance that God is at peace with you and that your works are righteous and whatever fault is in them are buried in Christ’s purity and not charged to your account.

© 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.