

WHY THEN THE LAW?
PART 6

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:19-22

October 10, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In 1936, J. Gresham Machen in his book, *Christian Faith in the Modern World*, addressed the perils of modern liberalism and wrote, "What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?" (p. 57)

Machen is not suggesting that the Word of God does not command our obedience or that such obedience is optional. To borrow Paul's words from Gal. 2:17, "...is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!" What Machen is emphasizing is that our obedience must never be confused with the Gospel.

Both law and gospel are essential "words" from God and the Christian is obligated to both. However, as Paul is teaching us here in Galatians 3, both must retain their proper office and function. This is why Paul carefully sets forth the differences between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants (i.e., covenants of promise and law).

In 3:19-22, Paul gives 5 reasons why the Law (Mosaic Covenant) is inferior to God's Promise (the Abrahamic covenant). 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.

The Law was given in order to reveal sin but it cannot take it away (v. 19a). The Law was ordained through double mediation (angels and Moses; v. 19c-20). The two-fold mediation of the Mosaic Covenant witnessed to the Law's conditional nature. The Law was temporary (v. 19b). It only lasted until the coming of Christ. The Law cannot give life (v. 21). It is for these reasons that the Law is inferior to the promise.

In v. 21, when Paul taught that the law cannot give life (i.e., justify). It raises the question: If the law cannot give life, what can it do? This leads us to Paul's fifth reason why the Law is inferior to the Promise.

LESSON:

V. THE LAW IMPRISONS EVERYONE UNDER SIN. v. 22

By telling us what the Law cannot do in v. 21 and what it can do in v. 22, Paul discloses the Law's proper purpose and keeps it within its lawful function and

use. In v. 22a, Paul writes, "But the Scripture (i.e., Law) imprisoned everything under sin..."

The purpose of the Law is to reveal transgression (v. 19), pronounce a curse for transgressions (v. 10) and thereby imprison every man (Jew and Gentile) under sin (v. 22).

In Romans 3:19, Paul writes, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." By clearly revealing our sin, the Law removes every excuse and holds us accountable to God.

Thus, in answer to his question in v. 19, "Why then the Law?," Paul reveals that the Law indeed serves a critical purpose in God's plan of salvation.

The law reveals our sin (v. 19), condemns us (v. 10) and thereby imprisons us in our sin (v. 22a). The very fact that the Law reveals transgression, condemns it and imprisons us demonstrates its inability to give life/justification.

This raises an important question: How does the law imprison?

A. THE LAW IMPRISONS BY DEMANDING BUT NOT GIVING.

Paul just told us in v. 21 that the law cannot give life (i.e., justification/righteousness). The Law exercises authority over a man like the Egyptian taskmasters that demanded the children of Israel to make bricks without any straw (Exodus 5:18).

Even for Christians, the law cannot grant power for justification (Gal. 3:10-11) or sanctification (Gal. 3:3). The Law can guide a Christian on how to live for Christ but it cannot impart any power to do so.

The Law can command us to delight in God, love our spouse or children or pursue a life of moral purity as well as describe what these things look like but it cannot give the necessary strength/life to do or be these things.

What we must understand is that the Law in its basic function and purpose, command, never changes. The Law only commands and never does more than that (Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 188).

B. THE LAW IMPRISONS BY BRINGING CONVICTION OF THE SPIRITUAL EXTENT OF THE LAW.

The demands that God calls us to keep in His Law are exceedingly broad.

In Matthew 22:37-40 (cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18), Jesus summarizes the spiritual extent of the Law's demands: "³⁷ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind... ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The Law commands you to love (treasure) everything about God (e.g., His justice, holiness, love, mercy, grace, goodness, wrath, judgments, sovereign authority, omniscience, wisdom, providence, redemptive plan, etc...).

The first commandment demands that you love God more than anything else ("You shall have no other Gods before Me," Ex. 20:3). In Luke 14:26, Jesus expressed it like this: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Every loyalty and devotion must be brought into subjection to your loyalty and devotion to Christ. Anything that stands in competition to your love for God must be totally rejected.

The Law calls you to yield yourself totally to God and to His will at all times. You are to be perfectly submitted to His rule and mission and never waiver such as when Jesus declared in John 6:38, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me."

Not only does the Law demand that you love God above all else, but it also calls you to love your neighbor. For example, the 5th commandment (Ex. 20:12) demands that you show honor your father and mother.

Concerning the demands of the 5th Commandment, the Heidelberg Catechism states that we are to "show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline, and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand."

We are to willingly and lovingly submit to all governing authorities and pray for our leaders, regardless of one's political persuasion (1 Pet. 2:13-15, 17; 1 Tim. 2:1-3). Wives are to joyfully submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; 1 Pet. 3:1-2). Children are to obey and honor their parents (Eph. 6:1-3). Employees are to submit to their employers and serve them well (Eph. 6:5-8; 1 Pet. 2:18-21). Employers are to submit to God and treat their employees well (Eph. 6:9). An unsubmitive heart is evidence of self-love and rather than Law-fulfilling love.

In the 6th commandment, God commands you to not murder (Ex. 20:13; cf. Matt. 5:21-22). Again, the Heidelberg Catechism is helpful when it explains that you are never to "dishonour, hate, injure, or kill your neighbour by your thoughts, words, gestures or deeds, whether personally or through another."

On the flip side, the 6th commandment requires that you are to "put away all desire of revenge and instead show only patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward everyone at all times and to protect your neighbor from harm as much as possible, and do good even to those who hate you," as Jesus commanded in The Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (5:44).

Jesus illustrates the 6th commandment in Luke 10 in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer (expert in the Law) who desired to justify himself, asks

Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life," (v. 25)? Jesus answers, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it," (v. 26)? The lawyer rightly answers by citing Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18 (v. 27). Jesus then replies, "You have answered correctly; *do this, and you will live,*" (v. 28, emphasis mine).

In order to expose this lawyer's presumption of righteousness, Jesus tells him a parable. Through this parable, Jesus exposes the lawyer's lack of love (disdain) toward his neighbor (Samaritan) and reveals how far short he falls in actually keeping the Law. The Lawyer is not a loving person either toward God or his fellow man.

These are just a few examples of the spiritual extent of the demands of God's Law. But it doesn't stop there.

James 2:10 says that if you break even one commandment, you are guilty of breaking them all! The Law is an inseparable whole. Thus, any transgression/violation amounts to a breaking of the law as a whole. This is why Jesus said in Matt. 5:18, "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

God created you to live a holy life (i.e., a life in total and perfect conformity to His Law with your entire being, i.e., heart, soul, strength, mind). There was a time when Paul thought of himself as holy ("as to righteousness under the law, blameless," Philip. 3:6b).

But, through the Holy Spirit, he came to understand the exceeding broad demands of God's Law. He came to realize that true holiness does not consist merely in refraining from acting out one's sinful desires or outwardly conforming to a standard of mere morality. Moral effort is not enough before God. Simply avoiding or modifying bad behavior is not evidence of real love for God as required in His Law. Rather, it is evidence of being driven to escape punishment or selfishly earn rewards for one's obedience. But, inwardly, there is no true desiring and cherishing of God as the motive for one's obedience.

Paul came to see that the Law extends to all his affections, intentions, desires, inclinations, thoughts, words, and deeds. When a man sees this, it kills his self-confidence and makes him see that he has no righteousness that is conformable to the Law. Thus, Paul declares in Romans 7:9, "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died."

In other words, "I thought I was holy. I thought I was good. But, when I came to understand the spiritual extent and demands of God's Law, my sin was revealed. All of my presumption of righteousness was crushed. All of my supposed goodness vanished. All of my arrogance of trusting in my own works crumbled. All of my excuses and spin were silenced. Thus, the Law locked me up in the prison of my sin and threw away the key."

C. THE LAW IMPRISONS BY BRINGING CONVICTION OF ONE'S SIN AND SIN NATURE.

In Galatians 3:19 Paul says that the Law “reveals sin as transgression.” In Romans 3:20, he says the Law gives knowledge of sin. Conviction of sin is a conscious awareness that you have transgressed / violated God’s Law. 1 John 3:4 says, “sin is lawlessness.” Sin is failing to live in perfect conformity to the demands of God’s Law (i.e., failing to love (treasure) God above all things and to love your neighbor).

Through the law, the Spirit of God begins to awaken you and deal with you in regard to this. Not only are you made aware of a particular sin(s) in your life. But you also come to see that your entire being is destitute of all righteousness.

You become convicted that you not only do bad things but that your entire being is radically depraved (i.e., original sin= the fallen condition/ corruption in which we are born). Psalm 51:2-5 illustrates this kind of conviction of sin. David was not only acutely aware of his particular sins that he had committed (51:2-3) but he also came to see that he himself was utterly depraved (51:4).

Through this acute awareness of sin, a man comes to see that he is a slave to his sin; that he is locked up in a prison with no hope of escape or leniency. The Law leaves a man exasperated with feelings of doom and dread with one’s sin ever before him (51:3).

D. THE LAW IMPRISONS BY BRINGING CONVICTION OF GUILT.

The Law not only gives you an acute knowledge of your sin and sinfulness but it also heightens your sense of guilt and makes you acutely aware of the just punishment for your sin (“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment,” Ps. 51:4).

When a judge sentences a person to prison who has been found guilty of a crime, that sentence is the consequence for one’s lawbreaking. In the same way, when God’s Law convicts you of your guilt, you become keenly aware that His sentencing is the just consequence for your transgressing of His Law.

Ralph Erskine writes,

As by the precept of the law, the man comes to get the knowledge of the intrinsical evil of sin in its nature; so by the penalty of the law, he comes to get the knowledge of the consequential evil of sin, as binding him over to hell, death, and damnation; that the curse of God, the wrath of God, the vengeance of God is the...train of attendants that accompany sin:

...so the man is put in fear of hell and damnation. It may be, when he goes to bed, he shall never rise again; when he goes out, he thinks he shall never come in again; he is afraid his meat choke him, or the house fall above his head, or the earth open and swallow him up: sense of wrath haunts him like a ghost;

the man is put in prison, and concluded under sin, Gal. iii. 22. Sin is the prison, the sinner is the prisoner, God is the judge, and the curse of the Law is the bond by which the prisoner is tied neck and heel; and from this prison there is no escape, without the mercy of God in Christ (Law-Death, Gospel-Life, p. 31).

This function of the Law, leads us to ask: Why does the law imprison?

Paul provides the answer in the second half of v. 22, "so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

By revealing our total inability to keep the Law's demands for justification/life, the Law imprisons us so that we will trust only in God's promise.

When Paul says the Law cannot give life, he is inferring that our "works do not justify us" (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 333*). The Law discloses our dependence upon ourselves ("works") for righteousness before God and drives us to seek for righteousness in another who is totally outside of ourselves (i.e., Jesus).

The Law, then, is not against the promise (v. 21) but rather for it. God didn't give the Law to fulfill the promise or grant life and righteousness. Rather, God gave the Law to humble us and make us aware of our absolute need of Christ.

The Law makes us look to Christ for our righteous standing before God, not just as a one time act but also throughout our entire lives. The Law is necessary to make us aware of our constant need of Christ, as He is freely promised to us in the gospel. Thus, the Law continues to play a vital role in the life of a Christian.

Q. 115 in the Heidelberg Catechism asks: "If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?"

Here's this answer: "...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."

So, instead of operating against the promise (v. 21), when understood properly, the purpose and function of the Law actually contributes to justification and serves the promise!

Martin Luther writes,

It follows, therefore, that the Law with its function does contribute to justification- not because it justifies, but because it impels one to the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law; but we show its true function and use, namely, that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ. After the Law has humbled, terrified, and completely crushed you, so that you are on the brink of despair, then see to it that you know how to use the Law correctly; for its

function and use is not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 315*).

The Law is not life-giving (v. 21) but it drives us to Jesus, who is (v. 22)! When the Law convicts us of sin the answer is not to burden ourselves with even more laws (e.g., tips and keys for successful living).

We need to understand that as sinners, our default setting is to always assume that we are pretty decent people who just need a little direction (law) but not redemption (gospel). We are often tempted to think that it is the quality our faith, obedience and repentance that delivers us from the penalty and power of sin rather than the quality of Christ's saving work for us.

God did not give the Law to make us better people or blessed people but rather to reveal how bad and cursed we are.

Martin Luther declares, "...the principal purpose of the Law in theology is to make men not better but worse; that is, it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring," (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 327*).

REFLECTION:

Paul says the purpose of the Law is to imprison us. Through the Law, God humbles us so that we might seek more and more after Christ, who is freely offered to us in the promise of the gospel!

The Law makes the gospel truly good news! Luther said, "He who has never tasted the bitter will not remember the sweet," (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 329*).

Just as a drought leaves the earth thirsting for rain, so the Law leaves us thirsting for Christ. God is most attractive and desirable when we are the most thirsty and parched.

Note carefully: Jesus does not pour out His water on soaked, fertile ground (self-righteousness). But, to the one who has been parched by the Law and become like dry ground and thus cries out like the Psalmist, "I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land" (Ps. 143:6), Jesus gladly and willingly offers this invitation, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink," (Jn. 7:37).

To the woman at the well, Jesus promises, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life," (Jn. 4:14).

To all this morning who feel like the Psalmist and are crying out, "my soul thirsts for you like a parched land," Jesus says, "let him come to me and drink."

To all who feel locked up in the prison of your sin, Jesus proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed..." (Lk. 4:18).

Ralph Erskine declared,

O! is there any poor prisoner here, that finds himself shut up in prison, under the power of sin, and under the guilt of sin, and wrath of God? O let this give you some comfort for the present, till God loose your bands, that this is the way God is taking to make you dead to the law, that you may live to God. (Law-Death, Gospel-Life, p. 31).

To all who are thirsty, Jesus promises in Rev. 21:6 "...To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."

"The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price," (Rev. 21:17).

© 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.