

Galatians and the Law(s)

We will look at one question before we go into lecture 14: if we talk about God giving the gift of faith when we share the Gospel, how is it that we are asking listeners to do something by trusting in Christ, by believing in Jesus—John 3:16? We do not have time to discuss this much. When you preach the Gospel, and I had the opportunity to do that with a good number of people last week, you do appeal to them to believe in Jesus. But we know from Scripture (Ephesians 2:8-10) that even faith is a gift of God. So when I appeal, I'm appealing to the work of the Spirit in the listener's heart. Those in whose hearts the Spirit is at work will turn to God, trusting in Him and receiving the gift of salvation, the gift of God's work in Christ on their behalf. When we are asked to exercise our faith, we are primarily asked to continue to walk in that which we have received in Christ. How did I receive Christ? Did I do something? It was a gift of God that finally brought me to the point of saying, "I cannot bring anything. I am a beggar." That is how we are to walk with Him, by acknowledging that we are not bringing anything to Him. He wants us to walk in the works that He has prepared beforehand for us to do.

Let us go to lecture 14: Galatians and the law, or plural, the laws. We must now turn to the more specific question of, "What is the concern of Paul on behalf of these young Christians? What is at stake? And in the end, what is at stake for our lives? What is God communicating to us through Paul's letter to the Galatians?" You have already learned about the setting and the situation, and now we will look at it a little more precisely. Keep the Judaizers as a general background in your mind, and we will go on to look at what Paul is actually communicating. There are many references to the law in Galatians. When Paul uses the word, "law," he may not necessarily mean the Mosaic Law. We have to be careful and look at the context, at what is implied. And when he means the Mosaic Law, there may be different understandings of the usage of that Mosaic Law. I would like to propose to you that there are three usages of the Mosaic Law presented in Galatians. In theological discussions you may have learned about the first, second, and third uses of the law, and I believe we can find all three usages in Galatians.

The first use of the law is already prominent in Galatians 2:15-16. Verse 15 is really an introduction and 16 then goes into the details:

We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

There are two things to be noted here. First, the initial use of the law simply describes the significance of the law among the Jews. Most interpreters would say that this is the initial purpose or the civil use of the law—as restraint against sin in a society. As the law was given to the people of Israel, there was a particular use: to govern their lives, conduct, ceremonial laws, judiciary circumstances, etc. It is a general reference to the law in and among the people of Israel. Paul makes it very clear that there is an antithesis, a distance, a difference, between pursuing that law and justification by faith. Obedience to this original use of the law cannot justify--only faith in Christ can. This is a rather general reference to the Mosaic Law and it describes its function as a restraint, and particularly its function in the civil use. The judiciary, ceremonial, and moral aspects of the law would all be included in this civil use, this first use of the law for the people of Israel to govern its life.

Remember that I told you that there is some question as to whether the use of the law in the Old Testament was ever intended to justify, or whether it always anticipated that justification was by faith in Christ. I believe that the Old Testament law was never intended to be followed for justification.

Therefore, we can say that when Paul asserts that we are not to pursue the law to be justified, but rather we are justified by faith in Christ, he is arguing against the Judaizers and Palestinian Judaism. According to them, the law that was given to govern the life of the people of Israel—this judicial, ceremonial, and moral law—was used for justification before God. They believed this, I think, because of a weak understanding of sin.

I believe when we reflect on sin and its relationship to keeping the law, we are already building a very significant bridge to our own lives. While we may not live in Judaism, we do live surrounded by sin. We also have that conflict about what our assessment of the severity of sin is, and how that relates to our ability or inability to keep the law and to have good standing before God. Thus this is the first use of the law, the general or civil use. Paul says clearly that this use is not intended for justification. You must be justified by faith in Christ. Obedience to the law is very clearly juxtaposed to faith here in Galatians 2:16; observing the law in order to gain salvation and faith in Jesus are opposed. “We...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

Now Paul goes one step further and says, “Yes, we have this use of the law that governs the life of Israel, but let us reflect on the purpose of the Mosaic Law.” The second use of the law reflects on the purpose. Galatians 3:19 is our key reference to the second use, and Galatians 2:16 is the key reference to the general, or first, use of the law. Galatians 3:19 says, “What then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.” So the law was added because of transgressions. Then later on in 3:23 Paul says, “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

This is a new factor introduced by Paul: the law is not just to govern our lives, but it has a clear purpose. The Greek word used here for “to lead us” is to teach or instruct. Thus the law was to instruct us toward Christ, to lead us to expect, anticipate, and look forward to the coming of Christ. The law was, as some translations have it, “a task master.” That may sound a little too authoritarian to you, but remember that the Greek word here means “to lead to,” or “to convict.” As you read the law you will say, “I am a sinner. I fall short of the glory of the godliness that I find in the Old Testament law. It leads me to hope, to anticipate the fulfillment of the promise that I find in its pages—the promise of the Seed who will bring salvation.” That is what Paul is arguing here, that there is another use of the law, which is to guide toward something else. It is not a static law that stands still and governs the life of the people under it, but it is a sign post. It is to direct in a certain direction—to be a task master.

The second use of the law is found in 3:19 and 3:24. Those two passages are particular references to this second use of the law. When Luther lived within Roman Catholicism as an Augustinian monk, he gave lectures on Galatians. He was struck strongly by this second use of the law: that the law is to guide toward Christ. What he had been learning in scholastic Catholicism was that the law was to be kept. God was to be feared and if you did not keep the law, God would be angry and therefore opposed to you. Doesn't that sound like Pharisaic Judaism? Doesn't that sound like the Judaizers who said, “You better perform according to the law or you are without hope.” The Medieval Catholicism that Luther experienced was different but followed the same pattern of calling him to perform the law and hope that God may be gracious. So the Augustinian monk, Luther, wrestled in the monastery with the problem of an angry God. How could an angry God be appeased by mortification, prayers, exercises, or great efforts on the part of Luther? Into his wrestling shone the bright light of the realization that the law is a task master that is meant to lead beyond itself to the promise. Luther saw that the law had been placed between the promise of Abraham and Christ as a signpost pointing toward the fulfillment of the

Abrahamic promise that from his Seed would come salvation. God would bless His people. So you see that you do not have to live under the law, but you are to be convicted by the law and let that lead you to look for the fulfillment of the promise and thereby find salvation. “A man is not justified by keeping the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

The second and first uses of the law have the same goal of pointing us toward the fulfillment of the promise—toward salvation. The first and second uses of the law are closely connected. The first use is a little more static, and the second more dynamic—it has a goal that it pursues. There is also the third use of the law. For Luther, it was already a significant recovery of the Gospel to reflect on the first and the second uses of the law and to say, “You cannot come to a reconciled state with God by observing the law, rather you need to see that the purpose of the law leads you toward the promise.” That is a strong argument in Galatians: the law cannot save. There is a clear discontinuity—let us call it soteriological discontinuity. Soteriological means “pertaining to salvation.” With regard to salvation, the law is clearly discontinuous. It leads toward salvation in Christ, but salvation cannot come by the law; it can only come by faith in Christ—by receiving the promise of God. This soteriological discontinuity is a wonderfully clear point.

The laying aside of the law with regard to salvation is the Gospel recovered during the Reformation. That is the Gospel: if you bring anything to God, do not bring it. If you feel you have anything to contribute, let it go and receive the righteousness that comes from God alone. Some people have wondered, “Is there anything else in Galatians that Paul speaks about? If you just stop here, what you have is a wonderful Gospel of salvation by grace alone. But why are we saved? For what reason and toward what purpose?” There are some people who say, “That is all Paul says in Galatians about the law and so what you need to do is just hope that you have the right attitude to live a Christian life.” People would say there is no further use for the law in Galatians because you must not re-introduce the significance of the law in any way. You are living by grace alone. But the fact is that Paul re-introduces the law after having made these two very basic statements that these first two uses of the law cannot save. He makes further reference to the law, particularly in Galatians 6:2: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Some people say there is no third use of the law, but I will try to show you that there really is a third use of the law, and it is similar to the law of Christ. The same words are used as the other words for law. It is clearly not the Law of Moses but the law of Christ that is in perspective here. We need to look back a little to Galatians 5:14-15, which is a significant passage. “The entire law [that is, the Mosaic Law] is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” This is the significant point. We have to be very careful and judicious at this point. Paul still speaks about the significance of the Mosaic Law after having finished saying that the first and second uses do not save. How can we explain that?

Many people stop with the message of Galatians in chapter three and do not read on to chapters five and six, where there seems to be a re-introduction of the Mosaic Law. Galatians 6:2 alludes to it; Galatians 5:14 even says that this is a fulfillment of the law. One more passage, 5:22-23, says the following: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” These qualities are not under the Mosaic Law; they go beyond what the law required. But patience, peace, gentleness—these fruits of the Spirit—actually express moral character and goodness that the law indicates and moves toward. Thus we are confronted with the following challenge: the law, as given to the people of Israel in its civil use, cannot save. The purpose of the Mosaic Law is to lead us as a task master toward the promise. And the fulfillment of the law is the consequence of the Christian life. You will, as you live by grace, love your neighbor as yourself, which is half of the total sum of the Old Testament law.

I am not talking yet about looking at the law and seeing what God does with it. At this point I am simply saying there is a third use of the law, and that third use is based on grace alone. That is where many people go wrong. That third use is not re-introducing something like this: “God has done so much for you; now it is your turn. You better follow the law to prove your gratefulness.” That is wrong. “As you have received Christ, so walk in Him.” If you have received Christ by grace, walk in Him by grace. But you see, there is a purpose of being justified by grace. There is a purpose of having received salvation, and that purpose is godliness. God is pursuing godliness for his people. He is not saving a people just to justify them and make them legally acceptable. No, His purpose is to bring a people unto Himself with godliness. Thus we have the question of the imputation of righteousness, of justification and sanctification. The outgrowth of God's work in our lives is that we are conforming to the law of God. Therefore, we can say this: Paul was not antinomian, nor was he legalistic. Antinomian means having no regard for the law: lawless. Legalistic means believing that you must be pursuing the law in order to find acceptance before God. He falls into neither group because the third use of the law, the law of Christ which leads to godliness, is fully and squarely based on the grace, forgiveness, justification, and sanctification of God in our lives. God pursues a purpose with us. He desires godliness. As St. Augustine said, “God requires much and He gives all to achieve those requirements.” He sets before us a standard and then He enables us to get there. Thus we are not re-introducing the law by the back door, as if we were loudly proclaiming grace but living as if we were still under the law—trying to win God's pleasure in our own strength. No, always and at all times we are justified and sanctified by grace alone; by God's work that works in such a way that we are moved towards godliness. When we are living in this way we will be able and willing to obey the command of Galatians 6:2 to bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:21, “I am not under the law...but am under Christ's law.” Some people suggest that there is a great difference, like night and day, between living under the law and living under the law of Christ. They are vastly different. One is self-centered; the other is Christ-centered. But the quality outcome, how it looks, is similar. The problem is that self-centered living under the law is never going to be acceptable before God. Living on the basis of Christ, which expresses itself in godliness—coming from the position of acceptance before God by His work alone and moving forward into godly relationship—bearing each other's burdens, living with neighborly love, and so forth—is pleasing to God. I think it is so important to understand that Paul is not teaching the Galatians or us to disregard the law, nor is he saying that, having been saved by grace, we must now live by the law. Rather, he is saying that keeping the law is a necessary and natural outgrowth of living on the basis of the promise. This is supported by what Paul says in 3:31: “Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.” I have said nothing thus far about Christ being the fulfillment of the law. That is a very important Pauline teaching: that we cannot be justified by observing the law. We are drawn toward the promise by seeing the law, but we have our Lord as the one who perfectly lived out and fulfilled the requirements of the law. He is the only one. It is very clear that we say He is our righteousness; He is our fulfillment of the law.

But in this lecture I am reflecting on the fruit of the Spirit in our hearts that leads to a godly life as an effect of God's work. A question has been asked about the judicial, ceremonial, and moral law. This is a distinction that is not expressly stated in Scripture. However, if we look at Christ as the fulfillment of the law there is also an aspect in which He completes certain requirements of the law, and that would be particularly referring to the ceremonial law. When the ceremonial law lives through the Day of Atonement once a year, it celebrates the temporary forgiveness on behalf of the people of Israel. When Christ, the perfect lamb, died once and for all on behalf of the people, as Hebrews says, you not only have a fulfillment, but a completion—an end to that ceremonial law. The ceremonial law was a shadow;

now you have the real thing. There is a completion and fulfillment of that law and you do not need to continue it. That is why I am not impressed by any efforts, be they Jewish or Christian, to reintroduce the temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. We have been given the perfect, the enduring, once and for all sacrifice. We do not need to step back and again begin with an annual sacrifice when the perfect lamb has already been slain on behalf of the people of God.

As we look at Christ we see that there is a major fulfillment and completion aspect with regard to the ceremonial law. Where there is some question is with regard to the judicial law. How does that still apply? What is there in terms of continuity and discontinuity? There is continuity of the moral law—of the instructions of life conduct and how we relate to other people. I would hold that there is continuity of the importance of the moral law. But please beware that continuity cannot go unless it goes through the work of Christ. From now on, please read the Old Testament law and even the particular ethical instructions in the New Testament in two ways. First, they are signposts that lead us to Christ. When you read instructions for how you should live, they lead you, convict you, show you the purity of God, which you do not have, and bring you again to the only acceptable position: “I am a beggar. I am receiving forgiveness and righteousness from Christ alone.” And then also when you read the moral instructions in the Old and in the New Testaments, you are learning of God's purposes for your life. God's law is His intention statement of what He is pursuing in your life. But please remember they are not things that you can do on your own, but in your dependency upon Christ they will be brought forth.

Some of you may wonder whether you should be actively pursuing to do what God is saying, or if you will just be surprised when you suddenly forgive somebody who you would really like to slap in the face. And you say, “That's interesting. I have just been led to fulfill the law.” It may happen this secondary way, but we do need to seek sanctification by the power of the Spirit. We need to also be careful not to fall into the trap of the Judaizers when we read the instructions of God. We ought to be saying, “This is what God is expecting of me. I need to do it, but I can only do it in His power, prayerfully saying, ‘Thank you God. This is what you are intending for me. These are your purpose statements. This is the goal of the work of the Spirit of God in my life. This is what You want and intend to do.’” We must prayerfully say, “I cannot do it. I am dependent on your forgiveness. I am dependent on the atonement of Christ. I can only live from that. But in your favor, work this fruit in my life that what I read here will become reality in my life.” When Jesus says, “Guard your eyes; do not look lustfully at anyone,” I am convicted. And then I am brought to the throne of Christ and I am praying, “Lord, work this purity into my heart that I would live according to your precepts.” That is Gospel-driven, grace-driven, godliness. It never falls back into the trap of a self-generated purity because whenever you come into a self-generated purity, you oppose the Gospel.

We are as opposed to the Gospel when we have this legalistic attitude as we are when we have an antinomian attitude, saying, “I have been forgiven. Now I am going to have a good time because God will always forgive me.” Both of these approaches are self-centered and they miss the point of the Gospel, which drives you toward godliness. We must be so careful that we do not fall into antinomianism—which says the law is finished and is no longer applicable at all—or legalism, saying, “God has done so much for me and now it is my turn. I need to perform this and this and this.” They are both selfish attitudes: legalism appealing to self effort and antinomianism to self pleasure. They both cause us to be locked into self, not free to actually grow in godliness. A major point in how to live is to live in the Spirit and not in the flesh; this is a major teaching in Romans eight to which we will come. There are some indications here in Galatians that we are to live by the Spirit. We need to read the Word and yield to the work of the Spirit in our lives. We will study that more when we come to the problem of the indicative and imperative. I want to make that point very clearly and carefully because I have seen so much disarray in the churches over this point. You need to discern for yourself what your understanding

of your sinfulness and your sinful state really is. The shallower your understanding of sin, the more easily you will drift into one of these two extremes. You will either say, "I am basically okay, I am a decent person, so I will not do everything wrong." Or you will say, "You know, I can really do a lot now. I am pretty pure in my life." You will have a certain self confidence and you will look at the moral instructions of God's Word and say, "I am doing pretty well."

The more severe and biblical your understanding of your basic animosity and separation from God in your natural being, in your life that is not regenerate toward God, the more you will say, "I cannot please God except that God comes to me." I think that is not just a basic conversion truth, but that should be a tone and a pattern of life. It should color our morning, noon, and evening. I think that is where we mess up. We can all say how we were saved by grace through faith. You can do that. But if you catch yourself at 11:30 in the morning and ask yourself, "How am I living right now?" The answer is the same. "I am living this minute by grace—by the redemption that Christ has given and by dependency upon Him. I am living by my awareness that I am incapable and unable to please God. It is only by my dependency upon Him that I can do anything at this moment." I wonder how our lives would change if we lived with this awareness of dependency on God at every moment. We know we are saved by grace alone, but we often live as if we were not saved by grace alone but rather by this or that performance or deed. We probably often vacillate between these two wrong attitudes of legalism and antinomianism. We say, "God will not bother too much about this or that," or we are completely concerned that if we do this we will be in serious trouble. Both of those attitudes are catching us as we have vacillated between them. We need to find Gospel life, which is neither libertarian nor bound to the law in self-centeredness, but is free to live in godliness and produce that fruit which we read of in Galatians 5:22. It is amazing how close that is to the instruction of God. Remember in Galatians 5:14 that Paul can say, "You are fulfilling the law by loving your neighbor." Thus there is still a continuity aspect, but that does not mean that we can now, or ever have been able to, earn our standing before God by keeping the law.