

“The Law Does Not Nullify the Promise”

Text: Galatians 3:15-25

Justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through obedience to the law of Moses, submission to ritual circumcision, or through keeping certain dietary laws. The blessings of the promise that God made to Abraham also come to Abraham’s children—Jew or Gentile—through faith and not by works. This is Paul’s gospel.

A group of false teachers, called the Judaizers, had come to the Galatians shortly after Paul had left the region attacking Paul’s authority and undermining the gospel that he had previously preached throughout the region. The Judaizers were zealous for the law and the tradition of their fathers. When Gentiles began to respond to the gospel after Paul preached it to them and came to faith in Jesus Christ, the Judaizers became insistent that Gentiles must not only believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but that they also submit to ritual circumcision, keep certain dietary laws, and obey the law of Moses. If they failed to do so, they would forfeit their right standing before God.

Paul was not only angry about what the Judaizers were teaching, Paul was also angry at their deceptive methods. Apparently, they were infiltrating the Galatian churches and spying on those exercising their freedom in Christ, so as to turn any possible instances of the abuse of Christian liberty into an argument against Paul’s gospel. As Paul saw it, since we are justified (given a right standing before God) by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, any departure from this gospel was a different gospel, which is no gospel. For Paul’s gospel had been revealed to him by Jesus Christ, and it was through this same gospel the Galatians had trusted in Christ alone through the “hearing with faith.” This response of faith was also the means by which the Galatians themselves received the Holy Spirit and saw God work miracles in their midst.

Continuing his argument that both justification and the promise to Abraham come to Abraham’s children by faith alone, in verses 15-18 of Galatians 3, Paul argues that the fact that the promise was given chronologically before the law does not mean that the law nullifies the promise.

15 Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. 16 The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ. 17 What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. 18 For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

After discussing the death of Christ in verses 12-13—specifically Christ becoming a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of the law, bearing the curse for us in his own body hanging upon

the cross (tree), so that Jew and Gentile alike can receive the gift of the promised Holy Spirit—Paul now moves on in verses 15-18—discussing the nature of the promise and its connection to the different covenants made with Abraham and Moses. By using Abraham as an example, Paul is able to prove that his understanding of the gospel which is centered in the public placarding of Christ crucified for sinners, is the very same gospel that God preached in advance to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15:6. This means that Paul was no innovator. For the promise God gave to Abraham that he would justify Abraham and all of his spiritual children, Jew and Gentile, through faith alone was taught throughout the Old Testament. The substance of that promise was that through the means of faith, God would give the children of Abraham the gift of the Holy Spirit and so having received the Holy Spirit, they were now heirs to the promise.

Paul's main point in this section is really a simple one. The promise given to Abraham as recounted in Genesis 17, preceded in time God's giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The law cannot nullify the promise. In Galatians 3:15, Paul puts it this way. "*Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life....No one can set aside*" (literally "render ineffectual") that which has been duly established (or that which has been "ratified beforehand, or previously confirmed"). In this case, Paul is referring to the covenant (*diatheke*) which God had previously established with Abraham as recounted in Genesis 15-17. This covenant cannot be set aside by a later covenant, because the covenant God made with Abraham is unconditional in the sense that it is God himself who swears the oath to Abraham to bring to pass what is promised—"*I will be your God and you and your descendants after you will be my people.*"

How, then, can the Judaizers argue that obedience to the law of Moses and submission to circumcision somehow nullifies the prior covenant in which God swore the oath to be faithful to his promises? All the more problematic is that the Abrahamic covenant was duly ratified by Abraham through the sign and seal of circumcision. How can something that has been properly ratified be set aside by a later covenant with Moses? There are no legal grounds for overturning this covenant. If correct, the Judaizers find themselves in the difficult situation of proving that the giving of the law of Moses somehow overturns and nullifies the previous covenant that God made with Abraham. This is something very difficult to prove when the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant which God himself not only initiates, but is also a covenant in which God himself swears the covenant oath and if he fails to keep his promises, brings the covenant curses down upon himself.

In verse 16, Paul makes a careful appeal to the fact that the promise was made not only to Abraham, but to his seed, "meaning one person, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ." The plural "promises" are, in this case, the promises of a land given to Abraham and his descendants as an everlasting possession in Genesis (see 13:15; 17:8; cf. 12:7; 15:7). "Paul doubtless understands this in a spiritual sense, although he does not pause to make this explicit."¹ This becomes clear when we note Paul's comments in Romans 4:13, where Paul extends this everlasting promise of a "land" to "the world."

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 155.

What does Paul mean, then, when he argues that Christ is the “seed?” Paul means that Christ himself is the true heir of the promise, and the guarantor that the promise would be fulfilled. In his death for sinners (becoming a curse) our Lord himself ensured that this would come to pass, since the only thing that could prevent the promise from being realized is the guilt of our sin, which our Lord himself has removed by becoming a curse for us. As Paul will point out in verse 29, it is Jesus Christ, Israel’s promised Messiah, who extends the promise to his own seed, those who trust in him (v. 26) and who are baptized into his name (v. 29).

Paul gives more clarification in verse 17: “*what I mean is this.*” The covenant is not overturned by the giving of the law, 430 years later. Paul here is using the standard rabbinic reckoning of the years counted between Moses and Abraham. His basic argument is that the covenant with Moses (the so-called Mosaic or Siniatic covenant centered in the law) does not overturn the previous covenant already made, ratified and established by God, in this case, the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham.

In fact, it is clear from Exodus 24, that this later covenant made with Moses is radically different from the prior covenant made with Abraham, since in the covenant God made with Moses, the people themselves swore the oath the Law, not God.² In Exodus 24:3 we read: “*When Moses went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the Lord has said we will do.’*” The law of Moses and the covenant at Sinai must be interpreted in light of the covenant with Abraham and not vice-versa. Paul will need to show his opponents what the law was and was not intended to do—a point he will take up in verses 21-22.

In verse 18, Paul informs the Judaizers that the inheritance is received through faith alone, since the promise is contrary to obedience to the law of Moses. God in his grace, gave this promise to Abraham, who received it through faith alone. Since Abraham was justified by faith in God’s promise (v. 6), so the “men of faith” are the true children of Abraham (v. 7) and will inherit Abraham’s blessing (v. 9). All of this comes to pass through the means of faith and not by works!

Calvin’s comments are appropriate here,

Beyond all doubt Paul excludes works of every kind. Thus in Rom. 4:14, “if inheritance is by the law, faith is abolished and the promise made of none effect.” Why so? Because salvation would depend upon the condition of satisfying the law. Therefore he immediately concludes that it is by faith, so that the promise might be sure. Let us carefully remember why, when the promise is compared with law, the establishment of the one overturns the other: because the promise has respect to faith and the law to works. Faith receives what is freely given, but to works a reward is paid.³

² Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Eerdmans, 1968), p. 17.

³ Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 60.

Here is the criterion, according to Calvin for distinguishing between the so-called “second” and “third” uses of the law. According to its second use, the law is contrary to faith and should serve only to drive us to despair of our own righteousness, and therefore, to Christ for forgiveness. In this sense, the law can be said to be “a teacher of sin.”⁴ But the law is a revelation of the will of God, and therefore, according to the “third” use, the Christian is to obey the law out of gratitude for what God has done for the believer in Christ.⁵ In this sense, then, the law is the rule of gratitude. It is absolutely vital to keep these two uses of the law clearly in view so that we do not turn gospel into law and law into gospel, and so that we do not tolerate either antinomianism or licentiousness, as well as any form of legalism along the lines of the Judaizers.⁶

But if the law cannot justify, and if the promise cannot come through obedience to the law, why, then, *did* God give the law? Paul answers this in verses 19-22.

19 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. 20 A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. 22 But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

In verses 19-22, Paul discusses the true purpose of the law. Having told us what the law cannot do, Paul must now explain what the law can do. Since we are justified through faith alone and not by obedience to law, and since the blessings of the promise are received through faith, and the law does not nullify the promise, what value or role then, does the law have for the Galatian Christians? Paul must show from redemptive history why the law was given as well as demonstrate to his hearers what role it was to play for the Christian.

Paul has already made it clear that obedience to law cannot justify or serve as the basis for receiving the promise. And so at this point, the apostle lists a number of reasons as to why the law does not nullify the promise.⁷

First, the NIV misses the point in verse 19, that Paul is not giving us the *cause* as to why God gave the Law, “because of transgressions,” but instead, Paul is revealing to us the effect of God’s

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 3-5.

⁵ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 113-115.

⁶ This gross error can be seen in the comments made by Steve Schlissel at a Reformation Day rally (October 26, 2001) in Ancaster, Ontario: “And what does God require? `To love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.’ That is the Gospel.” Thus even Reformed churches are not immune from this Judaizing tendency.

⁷ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 159.

giving to us the law, literally “to make wrongdoing a legal offense.” This means that the law was not given to us to correct our sinfulness. Instead the law was given to us to demonstrate our sinfulness. This is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s writings. The law exposes our sin and brings it to light as a transgression of God’s will on the one hand (Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13) while and on the other, law is said to stimulate sin to even greater action and guilt (Romans 7:7 ff) than when law is not present. Thus the law was given to show us both what sin is, as well as to excite and exacerbate sin within us. This is why legalism is so dangerous and undermines the gospel, and why legalism is so ineffective in combating sin. For the law was given to us to show us how sinful we really are!

Second, says Paul, the Law was added “*until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come* (v. 19).” This reminds us that the law and the covenant God made with Moses was added for a specific time and for a specific purpose, namely so that the trespass might increase, demonstrating very clearly human sinfulness, a point that Paul will discuss in more detail in verses 23-25. But even though the covenant with Moses was for a specific time and purpose (until the coming of Christ) to expose our sin and prepare us for his coming, we also need to remember that all ten of the Ten Commandments are reaffirmed elsewhere in the New Testament as binding upon the Christian. Therefore, the law still functions as both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.

Third, Paul tells us that the law “*was put into effect through angels by a mediator* (v. 19 c).” This means that there are two “inferior” parties here, the angels and a mediator, likely referring to Moses. According to one commentator, “the role of angels as God’s assistants in the promulgation of the law is employed in Jewish and early Christian tradition to enhance the glory of the law (Dt. 33:2, LXX; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). Here in Galatians, however...it is used to show the inferiority of the law as that which was given not directly by God but only through angelic mediation.”⁸

As far as the mediator goes, Paul certainly has Moses in view, especially in light of the comments made about Moses’ role as mediator for the people of God throughout the book of Deuteronomy (Ex. 20:19; Dt. 5:5, 23-27). In the context of refuting the specific arguments of the Judaizers, Paul is pointing out that the law was given to the people through indirect, intermediary means, rather than directly from God, as in the case of the promise made to Abraham. Thus, in this sense, Paul can say that the law is inferior to the promise.

The fourth reason Paul gives in verse 20, is that “*a mediator does not represent one party, but God*” is variously and problematically interpreted. It is difficult to know what exactly Paul means here. Paul’s point is probably to correct the notion that the very idea of mediation implies that there are two equal parties who participate in the transaction, as the people of God swear the oath in response to the giving of the law. But in the Abrahamic covenant, God sovereignly imposes the terms and swears the oath himself, thus the promise is superior to the law.

⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 161.

The fifth reason is given in verse 21. Paul asks a rhetorical question. Is the law opposed to the promises of God? That is, if the law is inferior to the promise, does that mean that law somehow contradicts the promise or nullifies it? This is an important point. Paul's answer to this is the emphatic, "absolutely not." In Paul's argument here, as elsewhere in Galatians, law has both a *positive* and a *negative* function. Again, it is extremely important to keep these functions clearly in mind.

Negatively, the law cannot impart life, because the law is contrary to faith and brings the full weight of God's curse down upon every violator of any one of its stipulations. Thus the law is not contrary to the promise because the true purpose of the law is not to bring life but death. The problem in the Galatian church has arisen because the Judaizers were misrepresenting the law's true purpose. The Judaizers saw law as consistent with faith and as a means of justification and the reception of the promise. In their view, the Covenant with Moses was superior to the covenant with Abraham, when, in fact, the opposite was true. When the Judaizers affirm the priority and superiority of the law, ironically, they not only end up denying the promise, but they end up denying the true purpose of the law. Hence the purpose of both law and gospel are misrepresented by the Judaizers.

The positive purpose for the law is spelled out in verse 22. In this case, the law serves to "*declare that the whole world is a prisoner of sin.*" God, who speaks through the Scriptures, "locks up all men under the condemnation of sin, providing them with no possibility of escape."⁹ The reason that God gave the law is to show that all men and women are the children of Adam, who constantly and consistently, whether in thought, word and deed, willfully, rebelliously and continuously, violate the revealed will of God, and in effect taking them captive to the bondage of sin. The law renders all of us "prisoners" of sin, when there is no redemption from its curse.

But Paul connects this function of the law with the reception of the promise through faith. Since the whole world is held captive to sin, the contrast with the promise is clear. The law which brings a curse, in effect, points us to the promise, which is only received through faith alone—"what was promised, being given through faith in Christ Jesus, might be given to those who believe." Here, Paul has demonstrated that the fulfillment of the promise comes through the covenant made with Abraham, not through the covenant made with Moses. Thus the law is inferior to the promise, and brings a curse upon the whole world, not blessing, since when we sin, we break the law and come under its curse. Thus "the Judaizers were wrong . . . to impose new conditions for salvation ("add a codicil") upon the original covenant of promise, which cannot be rendered null and void ("set...aside") in this way."¹⁰ They not only misunderstood the covenant with Abraham, they misunderstood the covenant made with Moses.

Following the now familiar theme of God's purposes being clearly seen in and through redemptive history, Paul now sets out to show the place of the law in redemptive history in

⁹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 164.

¹⁰ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 166.

verses 23-25.

23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. 24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

“*Before faith came, we were under the custody of the law* (verse 23),” Paul notes, reinforcing the theme of previous verses (especially v. 22) where we were told that the whole world was a prisoner to sin. The law held us captive (as prisoners) until the coming of Christ. It was for this express purpose that God gave us the law!

The NIV text notes correctly, that “*the law was put in charge until Christ came.*” This reinforces the idea that the law exposes and excites sin and thereby shows us our need of a savior who can redeem us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse, thereby bearing the penalty for our every infraction of the law (cf. Romans 7:7 ff).

But in addition to our need for forgiveness, we need a Savior who himself kept the law perfectly so that his righteousness can be reckoned to us. “The coming of faith is therefore, identical with the coming of Christ, who is the object of faith; it is the coming of Christ, making possible the coming of faith.”¹¹ This means that God is working out all of human history for the ultimate purpose of redeeming his elect and glorifying his name.

In verse 24, Paul introduces the oft-discussed notion that the “law is a schoolmaster,” “put in charge” to lead us to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith. The term *paidagogos* [schoolmaster] has an interesting background. The *paidagogos* was . . .

usually the slave who conducted the freeborn youth to and from school and who superintended his conduct generally—a function clearly differentiated from that of teacher or “pedagogue” in the modern sense. In describing the law as a *paidagogos*, therefore, Paul does not mean that the law exerts a gradual, educative influence on people, either by inclining them toward good until they receive Christ or by enabling them to realize their own sin, turn their backs on trusting in their own merits, and desire the grace of Christ....His meaning is...that the law brought mankind into, and kept mankind under, an objectively desperate situation, from which there was no escape until the revelation of faith as a new possibility. This revelation is, as we have seen, coincident with the coming of Christ; it is until the coming of Christ, who opened the way of faith to both Jews and Gentiles, that the law was the custodian.¹²

This is clearly a reference to what has come to be known as the “second” or theological use of the

¹¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 168

¹² Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 169-170.

law, in which the purpose of the law is to serve as a harsh schoolmaster, to give us no rest or confidence in our self-righteousness and obedience to the law, until we seek the grace of God in Christ. The law in this sense is a stern tutor, which guides us and regulates us, exposing our sin, until the coming of Christ, so that the superiority of faith and the promise can be clearly seen.

In verse 25, Paul makes it clear that there has been a significant change in redemptive history, because since faith has come, no longer are we under this stern tutelage of the *paidagogos*. “With the coming of Christ, the way of justification by faith in Christ is . . . the only way of obtaining righteousness.” The law has accomplished its purpose. It has prepared the way for the coming of Christ and faith by showing us how we are enslaved to sin and in desperate need of forgiveness. It is therefore, not opposed to the promise and does not nullify it.

Thus the law serves a very important purpose, but we must be very clear as to what that purpose is. In Galatians 3:15-25, we read, the purpose of the law is to show us that we need a savior! The law is described as a stern tutor. The law holds us prisoner to sin until we embrace Christ through faith. The law accomplishes its purpose when we see how sinful we really are.

When we consider the law from this perspective—the so-called “second” or “theological” use of the law—a number of things must be said.

First, it should be absolutely clear to everyone that there will be absolutely no one in heaven because they kept the law or somehow earned God’s favor through their good works or through their obedience. The law was not given to bring life, it was given to bring a curse and death. What this means is that when we die and stand before God in the judgement, God will not compare us to others, he will not inquire about our sincerity, nor will he cut us any slack if we tried our hardest to be good people.

God will measure us by his law. He will demand perfect obedience to every command. In this sense, the law is like a ten-link chain. Break but a single link and the whole chain is useless. Even a single infraction of that law means that we will hear these frightening words— *“not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me on that day, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers”* (cf. Matthew 7:21-23). God will not let us into heaven on the basis of our deeds, since all of them are tainted by sin. He will not let us in if we try our best, because anything not done from the perspective of faith is sin. And when did we ever, even for a second, try our best?

If your response to this is despair, “well then, who can go to heaven?” the law has done its work. This is why God gave the law in the first place, to show us that we cannot go to heaven on the basis of anything in us or because of anything that we have done. In the words of one old preacher, we must see the law like a mirror. We look in the mirror and we see we are dirty. The mirror shows us our true condition, driving us to the soap and water. We don’t take the mirror down off the wall and attempt to clean ourselves with the mirror! So it is with the law. The law shows us that we need Christ.

Second, while Paul is clear that the law will do its work and make all of us prisoners of sin, Paul is equally clear that Christ has now come—that one to whom the law pointed. As Paul says, Christ became a curse for us. He loved us and gave himself for us so that God can forgive our sins and grant us entrance into heaven. By dying for us, Jesus Christ is punished for our each and every infraction of God’s law. He was punished for every sin that we have ever committed or will ever commit. There is no more gracious an act conceivable by the human mind. It is only in the cross that any of us have any hope of heaven.

By trusting in Jesus Christ through faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sin. We also see that Jesus Christ kept the law of Moses perfectly during his earthly life. When we renounce our own righteousness and place our trust in Jesus Christ, God places our sins upon Jesus, who becomes a curse, paying for our sins. Through that same faith, God imputes or reckons to us the perfect righteousness of the Son of God. Thus God sees us as though we had never sinned and as though we had kept the law of Moses perfectly, even though we remain sinners.

This, then, is Paul’s gospel. To argue as the Judaizers were doing, that we must add our obedience to the death and righteousness of Christ is to deny that the death and righteousness of Christ is sufficient to save. The *Belgic Confession* puts it this way: “to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most blasphemy against God—for it would then follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior” (*Article 22*). It is to say that God must accept us on the basis of our own righteousness. This denies the covenant promises that God made to Abraham, and this distorts the meaning of the covenant God made with Moses in the giving of the law. For both of these covenants point us to Jesus Christ and his obedience and curse bearing, not our own.

And that is the whole point of Paul’s argument here—what God promised to give his people, the forgiveness of sin, a righteousness which justifies, the blessings of the promise given to Abraham’s children, the gift of the Holy Spirit, are freely given to those who trust the Savior—the seed to whom the promise referred.

For that man or woman who trusts in Christ alone is now regarded by God as though they themselves had perfectly obeyed the law and as though had never sinned. This is why the law does nullify the promise. For what God demands under the law he has freely given us in Christ! And this Christ is received through faith alone! Amen!