

Lesson 13 – Galatians 3:19-25

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Review/Introduction

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Paul is writing to the Galatian churches who are in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. “Grace” is God’s sovereign, omnipotent, supernatural, unilateral intervention in the most hopeless and helpless situations with actions that only He can perform and with the results that only He can produce, all for His glory. The true gospel is all about grace “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”.

Paul first greeted the Galatians, then started right into their correction and his attack on the Judaizers who are disturbing the Galatians with a different, distorted gospel, which is really not another since there is only one gospel of Christ.

Paul then went on to show that the true gospel that he preached was not learned from other people nor found in Scripture-invalidating tradition nor did he invent it. He received it directly from the Lord Jesus. He presented the authentication of the Gospel through the source (God) and its power to change lives (persecutor/murderer to preacher). That same authentication is true for the follower of Christ today.

❖ **Does your life authenticate the gospel?**

In chapter three, Paul begins the doctrinal section of the letter, looking at the defense of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

He began by showing that the Galatians had had a true spiritual experience because they had received the Spirit. They did not receive spiritual baptism through works of the law, but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Relying on the law cannot bring about Spirit baptism.

Paul then gave an OT Scriptural argument showing that justification is by faith alone. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. The declaration of Abraham’s justification by faith alone came prior to receiving circumcision and before the law existed.

Paul then showed from the OT that those who rely on the law for justification are under a curse. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul’s arguments were ironclad. There is no way to refute Paul’s arguments since they are clear scriptural teaching. So, now he anticipated the Judaizer’s response. Abraham was saved by faith they will agree (since the Torah says so). The Judaizers’ anticipated rebuttal is that when the law was given to Moses, the means of salvation changed from faith to law (or faith plus law). Paul refuted this false idea by showing the priority of promise over law.

Today, we look at Paul pre-emptively answering another Judaizer's questions: "If promise saves and law doesn't, then why was the law given?". If salvation has always been by faith, then what is the purpose of the law?

Paul's defense of justification by faith – The purpose of the law (3:19-25)

1. The law is temporary (3:19-20)

¹⁹Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only one*.

¹⁹Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. (ESV)

Paul has been progressing through things that the law could not do. The law cannot give the Holy Spirit (3:1-5), the law cannot give righteousness (3:6-9), the law cannot justify (3:10-12), law cannot change grace through faith (3:15-18). If there are so many things that the law cannot do, then why was it given?

The law was given "because of transgressions". "Transgressions" means stepping across a line and implies a breach of law, particularly the law of Moses. It refers to a person stepping beyond a fixed limit into forbidden territory.

"Because of" conveys the meaning for the sake of, on behalf of, for the pleasure of, on account of, by reason of. It may denote either cause or purpose. If cause, then the law was given because man's sinfulness was so great that the law was given to restrain evil. If purpose, then the law was given to show the character of sin, stepping over God's line; to show people the depth of their transgressions; the sinfulness of their sin. This second meaning seems the best based on the context here in Galatians.

The purpose of the law was to show what sin is. The law shows the character of an all holy God and the utter sinfulness of His fallen creatures. The law shows the sinfulness of sin. The law's requirements are impossible to meet which should drive people to recognize their sinfulness and need for a savior.

²⁰because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; **for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.** (Romans 3:20)

²⁰**The Law came in so that the transgression would increase;** but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (Romans 5:20)

⁷What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, **I would not have come to know sin except through the Law;** for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Romans 7:7)

❖ **How does a knowledge of the law impact your view of salvation?**

❖ **What does this purpose of the law mean in regards to preaching the gospel?**

Unfortunately, for some the law is used as an attempt to get closer to God or to "help" others get closer to God. In either case the opposite is true. The purpose of the law is to show how far away a person actually is from God.

The law was “ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator” (“put in place through angels by an intermediary – ESV”). The Exodus account of the giving of the law on Mt Sinai does not mention angels. However, there is the sound of a trumpet.

¹⁶So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and **a very loud trumpet sound**, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. ¹⁷And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹**When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder**, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. ²⁰The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (Exodus 19:16-20)

Other places in Scripture, angels blow trumpets (1 Thessalonians 4:16; Matthew 24:31; Revelation 8+) which seems to point to angels.

Other OT passages indicate that angels were present at the giving of the law.

¹Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. ²He said, “The Lord came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And **He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones**; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them. (Deuteronomy 33:1-2)

¹⁷The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; The Lord is among them *as at* Sinai, in holiness. (Psalm 68:17)

When the Arameans try to capture Elisha... ¹⁵Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

¹⁶So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed and said, “O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw; and behold, **the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha**. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

The NT also speaks of angels being present at the giving of the law on Sinai.

Stephen before the Sanhedrin... ⁵²Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³you who **received the law as ordained by angels**, and *yet* did not keep it.” (Acts 7:52-53)

¹For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it*. ²For **if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable**, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, ³how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, (Hebrews 2:1-3)

❖ **What do Stephen and the author of Hebrews understanding of angels at Mt Sinai tell us about their study of Scripture?**

The Holy Spirit through Paul is giving two more inferiority-of-law-to-promise points.

First, the law was ordained through angels. “Ordained” means literally to arrange thoroughly, to hand over, to arrange in its proper order, to issue orderly and detailed instructions as to what must be done. While not fully described in Scripture, in some way angels were involved in giving the law to Moses. The angels handed over the law to the mediator – Moses. The law went through a mediator between God and Israel. However, the promise was only between Abraham and God without a mediator indicating that the promise is superior to law.

Second, the law was temporary until the “seed” or Christ would come whereas the promise was prior to and endures beyond the law.

❖ **How might understanding the difference between law and promise impact your walk?**

2. The law’s inability to save (3:21-22)

²¹Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. ²²But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²¹Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²²But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (ESV)

The purpose of the law is to show what sin is. The law shows the sinfulness of sin. Since the law had a mediator, but promise only had God, promise is superior. The natural question then is, “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God?” Paul asks the question that the Judaizers were already yelling as the letter was being read.

“Contrary” means against or opposed to or in conflict with. While both the NASB and ESV translate it “contrary”, it is rendered “opposed” by the NET.

Paul answers his question with “may it never be!”, “certainly not!” (ESV), “absolutely not!” (NET). The idea that the law is opposed to the promises of God is inconceivable. God gave both so they must be complimentary, not opposed. Indeed, the law is complimentary to promise. The law moves one to see the need for a savior by displaying the unobtainable demands of God’s holiness.

The intent of the law was never to save. “For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.” Paul has already made it clear that the law cannot save.

¹⁶nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

¹⁰For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” ¹¹Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:10-11)

¹⁸For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (Galatians 3:18)

❖ **What do you compare yourself to, others or the Scriptures?**

Instead, “the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin”.

“Shut up” means literally to shut up, lock up securely or enclose together on all sides. The idea is to shut up securely, enclosing on all sides with no way of escape, completely and without the possibility of escape. Hence, the ESV’s “imprisoned”. The usage indicates that the Scripture continually shuts up everyone under sin.

“Everyone” is shut up under sin. “Everyone” means all without exception.

¹⁷“Can mankind be just before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker? (Job 4:17)

⁴“How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman? (Job 25:4)

¹The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good. ²The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God. ³They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3)

²And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no man living is righteous. (Psalm 143:2)

⁹Who can say, “I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin”? (Proverbs 20:9)

²⁰Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

⁶All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. (Isaiah 53:6)

Everyone is locked up securely under sin, so that salvation must be by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The promise is by faith alone. Shutting everyone up under sin means that the only way of salvation is grace through faith. All effort in good deeds or abstaining from evil is useless.

❖ **Does being shut up under sin lead you to grace or legalism?**

3. The law points to Christ (3:23-25)

²³But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

²³Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, (ESV)

Paul has been using the third person (3:6-22), but now changes to first person. He is lumping himself with all mankind as being held captive under the law.

❖ **When you think of other people, do you think of “them” or “us”? In your mind, do other people need spiritual things that you do not?**

Before we surrendered our life to Christ we were kept in custody under the law, imprisoned until faith was revealed to us.

“Kept in custody” means to keep inward under lock and key.

“Shut up” is the same word as in verse 22. It means to lock up securely or completely and without the possibility of escape. Hence, the ESV’s “imprisoned”.

Quite the picture; we are kept under guard, imprisoned by the law.

Are all believers “kept in custody under the law, being shut up”? What about those that have not heard about the OT before coming to Christ?

¹⁴For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16)

Whether we are a Jew who understands the law or a Gentile and has a conscience, God has given the means to see that He is and we cannot go to Him on our own.

❖ **What difference does pride or humility have in viewing your need for a savior?**

Sometimes Bible translations use English words because of historical use not because they are the best word for translation (see Ephesians 4:11). The NASB’s “tutor” is a long-standing translation. The NASB uses the same principles of translation and wording as the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901 which uses “tutor”. The ASV sought to update the KJV which uses “schoolmaster”.

KJV → ASV → NASB
“schoolmaster” “tutor” “tutor”

The ESV traces its wording to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which uses “custodian”. The predecessor to the RSV is the KJV.

KJV → RSV → ESV
“schoolmaster” “custodian” “guardian”

Unfortunately, the “schoolmaster” and “tutor” idea does not capture the meaning of the Greek. “Paidagogos” literally means “child leader” or “child conductor”. There is no sense of intellectual instruction in the word. The paidagogos was not the instructor of the child, but a slave whose job was to look after the child. He exercised a general supervision over the child’s activities. It was the paidagogos’s job to take the child by the hand and “lead” or “conduct” the child to the teacher who would give him instruction.

In the same way, the law takes us by the hand and leads us to Christ. In Paul’s metaphor, Christ, Himself, is the teacher.

We must be brought to Christ by recognizing that sin is sin, that we cannot save ourselves, and that only Christ can take away sin by becoming our curse. The law conducts us to Christ so we may be justified by faith. That is the purpose of the law. The law is not meant to be the standard for salvation nor sanctification. Christ is the means to both.

❖ **Are you using the law (or rules and regulations) for sanctification?**

Conclusion

The Galatians were in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul is giving ironclad arguments that promise is superior to law. Law cannot save. But the purpose of the law is to take us by the hand and lead us to Christ. The law shows us our need for a savior.

Additional Study

1. Read Galatians once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for six days).
2. Today’s Questions
 - How does your understanding of sin impact your preaching of the gospel?
 - How does your understanding of the grace/faith over law impact your preaching of the gospel?
 - Read John 4:7-45 and Matthew 19:16-22. What did Jesus do when presenting the gospel to these people?
 - How does your understanding of the law’s inability to impart life (save) and sanctify impact your walk?