

THE INFERIORITY OF THE LAW

Galatians 3:19-23

In the last few verses we studied, we saw how Paul demonstrated the superiority of the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise over the Mosaic Covenant of Law. We saw how the Promise was unconditional and unilateral (God put Himself under contract to fulfill His Word to Abraham – full of “I will” statements – God alone walked through the sacrifices), while the Law was conditional and bilateral (full of “if, then” statements that if Israel obeyed, God would bless but if they disobeyed, God would curse). And these two covenants, the Abrahamic and Mosaic operated, more or less, side-by-side but did not mix and were not of the same nature.

With that being said, Paul now has put himself in a position where it is natural to explain the purpose of the Law to his opposition, being the false teaching Judaizers and the misled believers in Galatia. The Judaizers were teaching the Galatians to use the Law in a way it was never meant to be used. And on top of that, it’s critical to explain because people like the Jews at the time loved the Law and cherished the Law. It was confusing for them to just all of the sudden drop the Law out of their lives as the way to approach God when God instituted it in the first place. But even though God had instituted it, Paul is going to demonstrate that He only instituted it temporarily. It had an expiration date (notice Paul’s use of temporal terms throughout this section: “it was added”, “no longer under”, “before faith came”). So if it really was only temporarily given, then why would God institute the Law to Israel if it was not through Law that the Promise would be fulfilled? What’s the deal? And while Paul is going to state some really positive features of the Law, they’re actually positive in the sense that they served to support the purpose of the Promise which came before it. The purpose of the Law, Paul is arguing, is actually going to demonstrate the inferiority of it to the Promise.

How is the Law then inferior to the Promise? We see this demonstrated through 4 features of the Law.

I. **THE LAW REVEALED SIN. (V. 19)**

“It was added because of transgressions.” The main purpose of the Law was not to save us from our sins but to expose our sin and reveal our sin and to show us sin for what it really is. It brought a fixed point of reference for us to compare ourselves too, which is God. It brought order to the world, defining what sin is. It brought restriction. Robert Gromacki said, “If no restrictions were ever placed on unregenerate wills, then sinners would manifest their position in every conceivable practice...[but now that the Law has come] man can’t plead ignorance as the basis of his wrongdoing.”¹ Romans 3:20 says, “through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Again, it’s like that **x-ray machine** which can reveal your faults and the areas where you need fixing but can’t fix you. Because while it worked to restrain sin in the lawless, it also produces opportunity for sin for those who attempt to keep it. You can actually translate, “It was added because of transgressions,” to literally, “It was added for the purpose of transgressions.” It added to transgressions. It made men sin more by exposing the depths of the sin nature – like Paul describing his life under Law in Romans 7. He basically said, “I confess that the Law is good but I cannot do it. The good I want to do I cannot do but I do the things I hate. Therefore I am no longer that one doing it but sin which dwells in me.” He’s saying that the problem isn’t in the Law, but the problem is in us!² It’s our sin nature! In these bodies that are cursed with all creation by the Fall. Romans 5:20 says, “The Law came in so that transgression would increase.” With that, grace increased, but think about that: God knew sin was going to increase to an extent through giving the Law but **He did it to prove we can never be good enough and cannot measure up or fix ourselves**. One man said, “The Law adds

to your sin problem by showing you just how sinful you really are.”³ It makes sin, “sinnier”. 1 Cor. 15:56 actually says, “the power of sin is in the Law.” The way sin works with the Law is **like electricity**. Sin needs two things to work: A vehicle and a power source. Your body is the vehicle and the Law is the power source. This only leaves you with one option: Unplug from the powersource, attempting to justify yourself by works. Think of **Paul with his coveting** – the more he thinks about not coveting, the more he covets! And now that I’m talking about coveting, you’ll probably even go out from here with it in your mind and start coveting things just because we’re talking about coveting. Like the **Blue Basketball illustration** I used weeks ago: If I tell you not to think of a blue basketball, what do you think of? A blue basketball. If I tell you not to covet, coveting is increased for some crazy, deplorable reason within us. He’s not belittling the Law but us. We are sold into sin. Slaves of sin. Prisoners of the law of sin at work in the members of our body. Who will set us free from this body of death? Praise be to God through Jesus Christ! It reveals sin and gives opportunity to sin; it set the standard and showed us we can’t meet the standard; and in that sense, has two relative effects I would I would like to mention that are not seen directly in our text.

By revealing sin and setting the standard:

A. The Law reveals God’s character.

One way in which it revealed sin was by simply revealing God’s character. If you want to know who God is, read the 10 commandments and see that He’s not a liar, not a thief, not a cheater and He wants what’s best for us. We know how high and holy and righteous God is. We know God better because of His Law.

By giving opportunity for sin and showing us we can’t meet the standard:

B. The Law deepens our appreciation for God’s grace.

By understanding our sinful nature, it makes us appreciate God’s grace more and understand grace better. If we didn’t understand the depth of our sin – that even when we try to keep the Law, sin increases in some fashion – we wouldn’t appreciate God’s grace the way we do. In fact, the deeper we understand our sin to be in our flesh, effecting our thoughts, words, deeds and motives, the more we appreciate grace. **Sin is more than just a bad behavior. Sin is a law at work in our fleshly bodies.** If you don’t believe me, just think about your dreams. You can’t control your dreams and they are often anything but holy. You never work your way completely free from sinful thinking. Sin is in you and you have no hope to save yourself or free yourself from it except by God’s grace and in glory.

The second feature of the Law that demonstrates its inferiority to the Promise is that...

II. THE LAW REQUIRED MEDIATORS. (VV. 19-20)

In more ways than one. The Law was all about mediators in the giving and observance of it.

A. The Law was given through mediators.

“Having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one partly only; whereas God is only one.” First, the text mentions **angels** first. The word ‘angel’ simply means messenger and can refer to a man but I really believe that the text is referring to angelic beings. Now when you read about the giving of the Law, that’s not necessarily something you notice. All we see is God talking with Moses face-to-face on the mountain. But in Deuteronomy 33:2, Moses seems to suggest in his blessing that God came in the midst of ten thousand holy ones. Jewish literature and other Scriptures also support this

idea that angels were there on Mt. Sinai when the Law was given. Psalm 68:17 says, “The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.” Acts 7:53 says, “you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.” And Hebrews 2:2 talks about “if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable...,” referring to the Law. Angels were there on Mt. Sinai and somehow involved in its transmission to Moses.

Second, **Moses** is the mediator being alluded to. Moses was given the Law by God and spoke to Israel on behalf of God. He stood in the gap between God and Israel. Even when Israel did hear God’s voice directly, they were so frightened by it that they asked Moses to speak for God instead (Ex. 20:19). And whenever a mediator is needed, it is clear there are two parties involved like verse 21 states. This goes back to what we talked about last week. The Abrahamic Covenant was unilateral – one-sided – He alone made it up and He alone fulfills it. God made the Abrahamic Promise covenant with Himself. But the Law is bilateral. Two-sided, two parties involved and a mediator between those parties. It was inferior in that it required mediators because the Promise didn’t.

❖ **The Promise was given directly by God.**

God Himself appeared to Abraham more than once reaffirming the promise. God communicated the grace message directly. He even ratified it Himself by walking through the sacrifices alone that we looked at last week. But on top of that, Jesus Christ Himself came to this earth to initiate the New Covenant aspect of it (that’s pretty direct!).

B. The Law was observed through mediators.

The observation of the Law required a system of mediatorial priests and sacrifices and works to approach God. It quite often separated men from their God beyond the norm, like by illnesses such as leprosy or deformities like the lame, circumstances people could do nothing about. The Law separated them outside the camp and from drawing near to the Temple and into the courts if they were blemished. That was a type of Christ and our need for perfection, but it did.

❖ **The Promise is observed directly through Christ.**

Jesus Christ, in accordance with the Promise, has given us total, direct access to the throne of God. While the Law separated man from God, He came and reached out to them, even touching them to heal them. The only mediator we need now is Jesus Christ and He IS God. You don’t need a priest or anyone else. You don’t need to pray to anyone else other than God, as some priests might have you do today like praying to dead saints like the apostles or Mary. You never need anyone other than Christ, nor ever will. He is everything! Our righteousness to approach God’s throne is found only in Christ and our access is only in Christ but it is direct and total access. In Christ, we have a backstage pass to the Holy of Holies!

The third feature mentioned by Paul, displaying its inferiority is that...

III. THE LAW ESTABLISHED THE PROMISE. (V. 21)

“Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! [don’t even think such a horrible thought!] For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.” Because of what has been said so far, Paul’s opposition would

surely question whether or not the Law was contrary to God and His purposes? Paul answers with an emphatic no! Just because deplorable man cannot seem to keep it and it is often a hindrance or obstacle to men coming to trust Christ alone, doesn't mean the Law was contrary or that God is working against Himself.⁴ It's man's fault that he is ignorant of the purpose of the Law and tries to be justified by it. The Law is not ultimately contrary to the Promise because it established the Promise. As far as justification is concerned, it is contrary in that sense as saw in verse 12 but in the overall scheme of things, in the program of God, God used it to establish His purpose of justifying people by faith. God gave the Law so that we would realize works cannot impart life and righteousness.

A. The Law cannot impart life and righteousness.

If the Law could impart life and righteousness, and so satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God, then He would of just gave the Law from the beginning at left it at that. But He didn't and couldn't because His holiness requires perfect righteousness that only comes through faith in Christ. You think about it: If the works of the Law could impart life and righteousness, then there would have been two ways to get right with God because Abraham was justified by simply believing God. God never offers two ways to be saved. No one in salvation history or who will be in heaven was ever justified differently. They've all been justified by faith. There is no such thing as more than one way to be saved. We hear a lot about how all religions basically believe the same thing and all are going to heaven to the same God. Well the Bible says the opposite. It actually claims that the way to heaven is narrow and only a few find it (Matt. 7:13-14). Not the majority, but a minority. Every religion in the world except authentic Christianity is a works-based system that is sending people straight to hell. They are working and earning a wage but all they're earning is a place in hell. The Bible says you cannot work for heaven and you cannot earn heaven by your works. It is not for sale and never will be. Man must humble himself like a child and depend upon God's grace through faith in Christ. That's the only way. And...

B. Only the Promise can impart life and righteousness.

And this is something Israel and the world should've known by now based upon the history of Israel.⁵ I mean they experienced just as much if not more cursing than they did blessing! They had more wicked kings than righteous. They had more trouble from the surrounding nations than respect. The northern half, Israel, was taken captive to Assyria. The southern half, Judah, was taken captive to Babylon. Even after that they were dominated by Persia and Greece and Rome. Law demanded a lot but couldn't provide to meet those demands.

I would say this also important to note the way the word life is used in connection with each covenant. The Law did offer life, but that life is not like the life that is offered by the Promise. The life offered by the Law was the life that even any unregenerate man today can find by living according to God's Word, apart from actual faith in Christ. Individuals and businesses and countries can really be blessed by living life in accordance with biblical principles even if they're not believers. They will find a blessed life because they operate according to the way God designed the world to operate which is according to His character. If it's holy, it's healthy but if it's evil its destructive and deadly. God's Word says think like don't lie or cheat or steal and don't get drunk, not because He doesn't want us to have fun, but because He wants what's best for us! Those things are outside of His character and lead us into paths of increasing harm and trouble with the law and consequences. In living according to some of the moral and practical elements we can have

a blessed life in that sense. But when Paul uses the word life in verse 21, “if a law had been given which was able to impart life,” he’s clearly referring to more than a mere blessed biological existence.⁶ He’s talking about spiritual life.

He’s referring to the life that Jesus talked about – a living waters type of life that wells up within you! To the life that Peter talked about – becoming partakers of the divine nature! It’s a Spirit-led life. Born-again life. Law can’t give that. Only faith in Christ can, which leads us to the ultimate purpose of the Law.

IV. THE LAW SHOWS US OUR NEED FOR A SAVIOR. (VV. 22-23)

How did it do this?

A. It shut up everyone up in the jail cell of sin. (vv. 22-23)

Everyone in the world has been shut up under sin – like being thrown in the slammer – the door is slammed. It’s shut up. We’re shut up in a cold and uncomfortable jail cell for our transgressions against the Law and the Law-giver. We’ve been kept in custody, handcuffed by the Law. And we’re not innocent. We’ve been proven guilty and can make no claims for ignorance. Romans 3:19 says the Law has shut every mouth, “so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.” The Law, being Scripture, was such that it left every single man in the entire world without excuse and holds them accountable. No one can say that they are innocent. Everyone is guilty. Everyone is born in the jail cell of sin and everyone guilty by Law. For what purpose? Romans 11:32 says, “God has shut up all in disobedience SO THAT He may show mercy to all.” And how does He show mercy but through Christ? By taking on human likeness of flesh Himself, living a perfect life that fulfilled the Law, and paying for man’s sins by His death on the cross. It’s in the jail cell of sin that we realize we are helpless to save ourselves and from there...

B. It turns our hearts to Christ to set us free. (vv. 22-23)

Twice in a row it says that. Verse 22: “So that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Verse 23: “Shut up [to what?] to the faith which was later to be revealed.” It shut up the world to its sin so that we would look to Christ by faith. The Law actually points us to the Promised One, the Promised Savior. It shows us our need for a Savior, even individually. The only people who really get that they need a Savior are those who realize that they cannot save themselves. They’ve given up on religious systems and works and their own goodness and their own abilities. They don’t have confidence in themselves or rely on themselves. If they did, they wouldn’t cry out for a Savior. If you ask someone if they know if they’re going to heaven and they respond with, “Well I try to keep the 10 commandments...” don’t really get it. It’s an indicator they don’t understand the gravity of their sin against God nor the purpose of the Law yet. The point of the Law is to show us that we are so helpless to save ourselves that we need a Savior to save us instead. We need to stop working to pick the lock on the jail cell and instead, call out to Christ to save them and pay the bail that they can’t afford. Some of us might have more money than others and can get closer to paying the bail money than others, but the reality is, none of us has enough money to completely pay bail. We must call upon Christ, who paid the price for us.

❖ **CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS:**

To take this passage home with us I just want to say this.

1. Use the lawfully.

This is a recurring application so I won't say too much other than don't try to be justified by it. We're justified by faith in Christ. The Law shows sinners their sin.

2. See your sin and your need for a Savior.

That's the purpose of the Law. It reminds me of the Israelites and the story of the serpent on the pole from Numbers 21. The people are complaining to God about their situation in life but they don't see their sinfulness and they don't take the Lord seriously. So God sends serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many started to die. When Moses interceded for them, God had Moses make a fiery serpent out of bronze and put it on a standard, a pole, lifted high for everyone to see and everyone who was bitten who looked at that standard, would live. The snake = sin. It is associated with sin. God wanted them to look at their sin. See their sin. The Law is just like that illustration. It still serves that purpose for individuals today who need to acknowledge their own sinfulness. Jesus said in John 3:14-15, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life." We see our sin in the high and holy standard of the Law but then we look to Christ, who became our sin, on the standard of the cross. And Acts 13:39 says, "through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

¹ Robert Gromacki, *Stand Fast in Liberty: An Exposition of Galatians* (The Woodlands, TX: Baker Book House & Kress Christian Publications, 2002), 103-104.

² Charles R. Swindoll, "Insights on Galatians," *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 8* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 81.

³ David Thompson, *Galatians 3:10-18 sermon notes*, accessed 18 March 2019, texascornersbiblechurch.org.

⁴ Gromacki, 106.

⁵ David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 321.

⁶ *Ibid*, 320.