

May 11, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Heirs According to Promise

Galatians 3:19-29

19 Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions, Galatians 3:19

The law of God was given to expose sin as sin. And what the law of God does is expose the sinfulness of our hearts. It shines a spotlight on all the rebellion and unbelief that resides in us that keeps us from God.

The law is the agent God uses to arouse sin. The law does not just expose our sin, it gives rise to more sin. The rebellion and unbelief of our hearts actually increases when met by the law. It is like poking a sleeping lion with a stick. I can guarantee you that if you sneak up on a sleeping lion and poke him with a stick, he's going to eat your lunch. It isn't the stick that makes him react that way – but it sure exposes his real nature. That is the law.

The Flagship Hotel in Galveston, Texas, is built next to the water. Large plate-glass windows adorn the ground-level dining room. Occasionally, guests used to come up with the “brilliant” idea of fishing from their balconies, located directly above the dining room. Using heavy sinkers, they would cast their hook and bait into the water. Unfortunately, the lines were sometimes too short and the leaded sinkers would swing down, shattering the \$600 windows. After spending a lot of money replacing expensive windows, the hotel management finally stumbled on a simple solution. They removed the “No Fishing from Balcony” signs from the rooms! The law has a way of bringing out the underlying predisposition to sin by suggesting what is wrong. Yet the law is good and godly – Paul says the law –

‘...having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. 20 Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. Galatians 3:19 - 20a

The reference Paul seems to be making here is the same one Stephen made to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem just before they stoned him, where he said: *‘...you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.* Acts 7:53 And this goes back to Exodus 23 when the Lord told Israel: *Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for My name is in him.* Exodus 23:20-21 And in Deuteronomy 33 Moses refers to this: *The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; He shone forth from Mount Paran; He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with a fiery law at His right hand.* Deuteronomy 33:2

This was evidently a reference that the Jews among his readers would readily recognize – and Paul seems to be saying that even though the law of God that they tried so hard to keep and couldn't – their insistence upon rituals and feasts, and foods and circumcision they were plaguing their Gentile brothers and sisters with – even though that law came from God Himself – **it was only given for a time.** Paul says that the law was added: *until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.* The whole Mosaic Law with all its ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices and priesthood was only transitory, temporary. Because all that it conveyed was embodied in the person of Jesus – the seed of Abraham.

The Father made that crystal clear when Christ was crucified. The Bible records that when Jesus uttered the words 'It is finished' the great veil in the Temple was ripped from top to bottom and the way into the Holy of Holies where God communes with man was thrown wide open. Access to God was now made readily available to everyone – no more priest to stand between you and God – no more day of Atonement was necessary – no more Passover celebrations were needed – the Seed of Abraham is here! Paul was reminding them that the Mosaic Law was temporary – a shadow of the real thing – the real thing embodied in Christ.

And the last part of verse 20 I believe speaks to this point: *Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.* Galatians 3:20b The Old Testament is full of two party agreements – bilateral commitments. God says 'If you obey – I will bless. If you do this – I will do that.' But when Christ came into human history – the bilateral agreement became a unilateral promise. **All the 'If you will – then I will' statements became simply 'I will'.**

'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and [I will] cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules. Ezekiel 36:25-27

This is incredibly good news for people who cannot hope to keep God's righteous requirements. Just think – the law says we should have no other gods before our God – and we say to ourselves that we're doing okay because we don't bow down to idols – but we have so many other things we worship more intensely and with greater love than God. The law says that we should not commit adultery – and we think we're okay because we've never had sex with our neighbor's wife – but we lust after her in our hearts. The law says we shouldn't steal – and we think we're pretty good because we've never held up a bank – and yet we stock our office at home with the stuff we take from the office at work. The 'If you will – then I will' doesn't work for us. The plain fact is we won't.

Which leads again to the question – 'Why then the law? If the law – 'If you will – then I will' proposition is unworkable – Paul asks a legitimate question: *Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God?* In other words, does the 'If you will – then I will' invalidate the promise to Abraham to bless him and through his seed the world? *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.* Galatians 3:21 Absolutely not Paul says. That is not the function of the law – that is not why it was given. Or to put it another way - **The law is the death certificate – not the birth certificate. Or to use the analogy of the light – the law is the light that reveals how dirty the room is, not the broom that sweeps it clean.**

The law is not a life-giver – and so it cannot be the means to fulfilling the promise of God. And the problem is not with the law – the problem is with us. Paul says again in Romans 8: *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* Romans 8:3-4 The law cannot save because the law cannot deal with the flesh where sin dwells – only the Holy Spirit has that power.

22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Galatians 3:22-23 By 'Scripture' Paul means the law – the law has locked everyone up – the word really means 'imprisoned'. The law has imprisoned everyone under sin – that is, we are locked up in sin with no apparent way of escape. If we could by our own effort somehow escape this detention – then the promise of God would have no appeal for us. But the law came to lock us up so that no one could stand back and say, 'I'm okay – I'm not a sinner' – so no one could say with pride – 'I'm good to go and I did it my way.'

So we understand that the purpose of the law was not to provide salvation but rather to expose our need for a Savior. This is the the central purpose of the law of God. This is so important to understand, because quite honestly, our culture today has so muted the distinctions between right and wrong, righteousness and sin, and our churches have so capitulated in the culture war that most people think they either do not need a Savior or that they can save themselves. The law of God is the truth of God written in our language – it is the declaration of absolute truth and holiness.

A vast majority of people – people who call themselves Christians and non-Christians alike – have bought into the idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth – that there are no truths that are true for everyone. We are the determiners of truth – my truth, your truth – can be different and affirming. Therefore there is no standard – no inviolable law – there is nothing against which we are being measured – every individual determines what is right and what is wrong for himself. Therefore there are no rules – we value personal freedom – you can have it your way. And the consequence of this thinking leads to the inevitable conclusion that there is no final accounting – no judgment – no one to whom you are accountable. There are so-called Bible teachers and pastors today that actually teach there is no hell awaiting those who continue in their rebellion and disobedience and hostility to God.

And the contemporary church today in many places is convinced that we don't need to talk about something as dry and dusty and arcane as the law of Moses. We need to tell people that Jesus will fix their lives and fix their marriages and fix their families. We need to help people feel better about life and make them successful and raise their self-esteem and elevate their comfort and not make them feel bad.

But the Bible says that the law has locked everyone up under sin – there's no way to feel good about that. But it is not that there is no purpose to this – the law exposes our sin as sin – in fact it increases our sinfulness – and creates within us a desire for a Savior.

Therefore Paul says: *24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.* Galatians 3:24 The law of God exposes us, increases sin, and ultimately becomes our tutor to lead us to Christ. Actually the word tutor as we understand it is probably not the best translation here. Other translations use 'schoolmaster' or teacher. We think of a tutor, or schoolmaster as someone who teaches us something – and yes the law does teach us right from wrong. But the word Paul used meant something quite different from what the word tutor means. Paul uses the word *paidagogos*, from which we get our word pedagogue, and thus, tutor. But a *paidagogos* in Paul's day was not a tutor or schoolmaster – he was an attendant to a child from the ages of around six to sixteen. He was the one who accompanied the child to school, protected him from harm, kept him out of mischief, and delivered him safely to the teacher. There was this sense that he was in charge of the child's moral development and welfare, keeping him from temptation, although he had nothing to do with the actual teaching of the child in school. **And so we might say that the Law of God was not intended so much to teach as it was to keep.**

In fact Paul uses that phrase in verse 23: *But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law.* The phrase *kept in custody* means primarily to guard. To guard against what? To guard against all the things that would ruin our character and spoil us for the inheritance our loving Father intends for us to have. When I was growing up on our ranch in Moses Lake, my parents and my uncle and his wife began to take in troubled young men, and some troubled young women, and in some cases, some that were not so young. Their lives had been devastated by drugs and alcohol and crime and society's only recourse was to lock them up. At our place they had a chance at redemption. But my observation over the years was that the older they came to us, the harder it was for them to change. They had lived a lifetime of rebelling against the laws of society and the law of God and something in their character was damaged. I observed many more failures than successes as a result.

And Paul says that the law of God was intended to keep us, to guard us, until it led us to Christ. For my part, there was something that was deposited in my character by the law of God through my parents that kept me for the day of salvation later in life. I was a wretched sinner – there can be no doubt about that. I was rebellious and disobedient – I thought that sin was my greatest pleasure, but even in the depths of my depravity, there were boundaries I did not cross. And I attribute that to the fact that my parents were praying for me and the law of God was always calling me to account even though I disregarded everything about it.

In one of Josh McDowell's books, there is the story of a high school guy who wanted to go swimming with his girlfriend at midnight. The neighbors down the block had a pool, and he knew it. So they ran down there and scaled the fence even though there were No Trespassing and Do Not Enter signs. Just as he hit the diving board, the girl yelled, but it was too late. There was only a foot of water in the pool and he broke his neck. He didn't realize that the signs on the fence—the law—would have protected him.

With every "Thou shalt not"—there are always two positive principles. Firstly, God gives them to protect and guard us. And second, He gives them to provide for us. He is not some cosmic killjoy who wants to take the fun out of life. He has a goal in mind – to bring us to Christ. His intention is that the law of God on the outside would take root in our hearts through faith in Christ on the inside, and that we would no longer be children guarded by the law – but heirs according to promise.

25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. Galatians 3:25-29

Let the law of God do its work – don't run from the law – embrace it. Pray the way the Psalmist prayed: *Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. 34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise, that you may be feared. Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good. Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life! Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise;* Psalm 119:33-41

Don't substitute living by the law for a relationship with Christ.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. John 5:39-40

Our good and gracious Father,

Precious and painful is the work of Your law in our lives – exposing our sin and helplessness and leading us to life. Thank You that You did not leave us feeling fine in our rebellion and unbelief, but made us miserable and wretched so that we would not continue in the seduction of sin but throw ourselves on Your great mercy and grace. For all of those under the hearing of Your word whose hearts are still hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and rebellion, in Your mercy do not let them find any joy or comfort until they are led to You. Let the strict arms of Your perfect law lead them to the sweet embrace of Jesus. How precious and sweet is Your convicting law to awaken in us both trembling and treasuring. Grant that it keeps leading us to Christ. Enable us, as justified sinners, to delight in Your law by Your redeeming power. And may we as those who have been made glad in God spend our lives to make others glad in You we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***