

THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE FREES THOSE LOCKED UP BY SIN AND LAW Galatians 3:19-25

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

If you could ask God one question and get an answer, what would you ask him and why?

Probably few of us would ask either of the questions that Paul asks in Galatians 3:19 & 21. "What then is the purpose of the law?" "Therefore, is the law opposed to the promises of God?" Few really care why God gave to Moses and through him to Israel the contents of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Yet these questions that Paul asks and the answers he gives are far more relevant to your life than finding out which job you should take or whom you should marry.

A. Review 2:16-3:18. How would you describe the main point that Paul is seeking to explain in these verses? Why is it important for you to understand how vv. 19-25 fit into this overall point?

Paul is setting forth how you and I can know if we are under God's curse or under his blessing. Every person in here, indeed in the entire world at this moment either has God as his or her enemy or God as his or her benefactor. Either we are objects of his wrath or we are objects of his love. Paul is asking these two questions as part of his explanation as to how it is that human beings escape being cursed by God and obtain the promise of being blessed by God. If you care whether God is your enemy or your friend, then you will care about these questions and Paul's answer to them. However, if you don't care what God thinks about you or what he is going to do to you when you die, then these questions are entirely irrelevant to your life.

B. What is it in vv. 15-18 that causes Paul to ask the question, "What then is the purpose of the law?" in v. 19?

Paul says that God promised his blessing to Abraham and to his Seed, which is Christ, 430 years before he ever gave the 10 commandments. By saying that God's salvation is based upon a promise which he made to Abraham 430 years before he gave the 10 commandments, the obvious question is, then why did God give the 10 commandments? Paul's opponents were saying that the fact God gave the law 430 years later proves that the promise was not adequate. The false teachers would say that obedience to the law completes what the promise started or else God would not have given it. They would point to the miracles that God performed through Moses and the awesome presence of God on Mt. Sinai as part of their evidence that the law must be very important and thus not ignored, as they accuse Paul of doing. Why would God go to all this trouble to give a law that promises salvation based upon obedience if it wasn't for the purpose of giving salvation as the reward for obedience?

What Paul does in these verses is show what role the law plays in God's saving work. He is very clear that it does not play the role that the false teachers say it does but it does play a role in God's saving his people. We are going to see three reasons why the OT fulfills a vital role in saving God's people.

STUDY

1. The first reason Paul gives for why God gave the law is "because of transgressions." What Paul says in three words here he takes about 3 chapters to explain in his letter to the Romans. What are at least two things that "because of transgressions" means based on Romans 3:20 and 5:20 (see also 7:7-13)?

God gave the law to Israel so that they would know when they were sinning. Israel before God gave the law and all men who are without the law are like the man who eats whatever he wants. He eats whatever he wants to eat with an easy conscience. However, when he goes to the doctor and is told that his bad cholesterol is too high and his good cholesterol is too low and that he must change his diet—suddenly he knows when he is eating bratwursts that he is breaking the dietary laws his doctor gave him. Once the doctor gives the dietary

laws regarding cholesterol, then you know when you are eating wrong. Prior to going to the doctor the man had no idea that eating a bratwurst was bad, but after the law is revealed to him, he now knows that when he eats a brat he is sinning. Eating the brat was always bad and was going to kill him, he just didn't know it. The doctor's dietary laws make him conscious of the sin of eating a bratwurst. In the same way the law makes us conscious of sin. It shows us what particular sins we are committing. The law cannot stop you from sinning. It has no power to change you. All it can do is make you aware that you are sinning. So men without the law can imagine that they are not displeasing to God nor under God's judgment. However, when the law of God is revealed to men, then they can see the particular ways that they are sinning and understand why it is that God is angry with them. Just like the man prior to going to the doctor can think of himself as a healthy person, once he goes and discovers what foods are high in cholesterol and what consequences come as a result of his bad eating, then he can no longer eat with an easy conscience. The law crushes human self-righteousness and human self-deception by making plain the many ways that human motivation and behavior are displeasing to God.

In other words, not only does the law not restrain sin, it promotes sin, it increases sin. When we are told that something is wrong we have an inborn desire to go do the wrong. Sin, when confronted by the law, doesn't submit to it but rather hates it and seeks to break it. Recently a friend told me about his son when he was a toddler. He was teaching him not to stick his finger in the outlets. Prior to his telling his son, "Thou shall not stick your finger in the socket," he wasn't trying to do so. However, shortly after he warned his son not to do it, he, the dad was sitting in his chair reading the paper. He could see his toddler walk into the room and stop and look at his dad. Then he turned and looked at the outlet, then back to his dad, then at the outlet. He stood like that for a full minute and then when he was certain dad was not looking, he made a dash for the outlet. Fortunately dad was watching out of the corner of his eye and intercepted him before he got there. The law stimulated sin in this toddler, just as it does in us. Paul says that God gave the law to Israel to make men conscious of sin and to stimulate sin. The law was given to make plain how bad we really are.

2. Can you think of a time when God's law has made you aware of your sinful condition?

3. For how long did/does the law has the function of making us conscious of our sinful condition?

But now notice the law is temporarily given for this purpose. It is given because of sins until Christ came, to whom the promises were made. The "until" shows us that the rule of the law as the governing principle of the people of God was only temporary, until Christ came into the world. Until the one who fulfills the promise arrived the law was over the people of God for the purpose of proving their sinfulness. Now that Christ has come, the law no longer has this place or this power in our lives. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law and from the power of the law to stimulate sin. The "until" does not only refer to the historical coming of Christ into the world but also to the personal coming of Christ to an individual. The law always serves the function of showing us our sins and of provoking sin in us. It can never keep us from sinning, that has never been its purpose. Its purpose has been to show us our sin and stimulate sin until Christ comes to us and saves us.

4. Why does Paul ask if the law and the promise are in opposition to one another in v. 21?

Presumably that would be one of the arguments that the false teachers were making against Paul's teaching on the law. They would claim that Paul, by saying that salvation comes by grace through faith in Christ and not by any obedience to any law, is teaching that the 10 commandments and the promise are in opposition.

5. How does his answer show that the law and promise are not in opposition?

His point is that if the law was for the purpose of making people righteous, for making them acceptable to God, then indeed the law and promise would be in opposition because then God would have given two different ways of being right with him, one by faith in Christ and

the other by obeying the law. However, God never gave a law for the purpose of making people righteous. The law is given “because of transgressions” and therefore is not contrary to the promise but actually serves the promise by showing people they need the promised Seed to save them. God never intended for righteousness to come by the law, therefore the law and the promise cannot be in opposition to one another as long as the law is used for the purposes for which it was given.

6. Verses 19b-20 are very difficult because we are unsure about what each of the four clauses refer to and how they relate to one another. However it is fairly clear that Paul is referring to Exodus 19-20 & 32-33 where God gave the law to Israel through Moses, the mediator. Read Exodus 19:10-13, 20:18-29, 32:9-10 & 33:3. How did the law affect both the people and God and their relationship to one another? How does this show the law cannot be the ground for reconciling men to God?

The law cannot be the grounds of reconciliation between men and God because the law merely condemns men and explains why it is that God should be angry with human beings. We see the effect of the law in the book of Exodus. In chapter 20, when God speaks directly to Israel, the people are terrified and beg Moses to have God speak to him and then he can tell them what God says. In other words they want Moses to be their mediator between them and God because if they have direct contact with God they will die. Then later in Exodus God tells Moses that he, after giving the law, cannot go with Israel; otherwise he will kill them because they are a rebellious people. He says that he must send his angel with them, but he himself cannot go with them because their law breaking only provokes his wrath against them. That is why God gave it to the people through intermediaries and not directly. The law provokes God’s hatred of humans and humans’ hatred of God. The promise on the other hand is a word of grace. It has no conditions attached to it. It reveals God’s love for guilty sinners and the means by which he will justly reconcile sinners to himself. The law is given to reveal our sinfulness and to terrify us with God’s just anger. It has no ability to forgive us but only condemn us, thus it can only be given through angels and through Moses. But the promise is a word of

grace and is given directly to us by the Lord himself, in the person of Jesus Christ.

The OT and its commandments fulfill a necessary role in God’s saving people because only the law convinces humans of the reality and power of sin.

7. What is the relationship between sin and the law in these vv. 22-23? What is the condition of every human being apart from Christ?

Verse 22 tells us that rather than righteousness coming by the law what the law does is declare the whole world of human beings to be the prisoner of sin. (Scripture in v. 22 is synonymous with law in v. 21.) The law does not provide a way of escape from sin by making people righteous but merely proves that humans are imprisoned by sin and cannot escape. There are no good people in the whole world and the law proves it. The minute you honestly hold yourself up against God’s standards of holiness as revealed in his word, you will immediately know that you are a prisoner of sin. Notice that v. 23 says almost the exact same thing except that rather than sin being the jailer, the law itself is the jailer. It is not that the law and sin are identical but that the law does not free anyone from sin but merely pronounces the judgment of God upon sin and stimulates sin. Sin is the crime we commit and the law is the judge, the prison warden and the guard that sentences us and keeps us as criminals to/in prison. We remain in prison because we never stop sinning and the law declares that we are on death row because of our sin.

8. What are some ways you have experienced your imprisonment by sin and the law?

9. Why does the Scripture declare we are prisoners of sin and the law makes us prisoners?

The Scriptures place us under sin so that the promise might come on the basis of faith in Christ to everyone who believes. Then in v. 23 we are told that we are held fast by the law until faith in Christ is revealed to us. The law shuts off all light and confines us to the dungeon of sin and death in order that we might discover that Christ can be trusted to

deliver us from our prison. He came to set the prisoners free and unless you know yourself to be a prisoner you will never go to Christ to be set free. It is the law that convinces you that you are a prisoner that Christ came to set free.

10. Compare and contrast the two ways that the two men in Jesus' parable in Luke 18:9-14 are affected by the law. How does the tax-collector show the "imprisoning" effect of the law?

The first man, who is a Jewish religious leader, a Pharisee like Paul was prior to his conversion stands in the temple praying. His arms spread wide and his face lifted to heaven, this man prays like this, "Lord, thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." This first man is not using the law for the purpose God gave it. He is using the law as the basis of God's acceptance of him. He believes he is acceptable to God because of the laws he has not broken and because of the laws he has kept. He is placing the law in opposition to the promise. However, the second man, the tax-collector is on his knees and cannot even lift up his face towards heaven. He is beating his breast in anguish and crying out in a tortured voice, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." The law has done to this man what it was sent to do. It has convinced him that he is shut out from the presence of God, that he is under the curse of God, a prisoner of sin. He knows he cannot use the law to escape the condemnation of the law. He knows that the law can only condemn him, not save him. Thus he cries out to God for mercy. He depends upon the promise of God to save sinners for the sake of Christ, the promised seed. Jesus, at the end of his story says that the tax-collector went home justified, not the Pharisee.

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11. According to v. 24 what is the purpose of the law? Compare this to John 5:39-47, Luke 24:25-27 & 1 Peter 1:10-12.

First, the goal of the law is to lead us to Christ. God gave the law to Moses and to the nation Israel and to us, the church, for the purpose of pointing us to Christ. I don't think the primary point here is to repeat what he has just said in vv. 19-23. The point isn't the law shows us

our sins and our need of a Savior. Rather the law reveals Christ. We see him in the priesthood and the sacrifices and the holiness laws and in the temple and in the pillar of cloud and in the water from the rock and in the 10 commandments. We see him in the prophets and in the Psalms. In John 5 Jesus says the Jewish leaders think that by keeping the law of Moses they will gain eternal life. Jesus says that is not the reason the law of Moses was given. The Scriptures, the law of Moses talks about, bears witness to Christ. The Jewish people ought to have recognized their Messiah because the entire OT was written so that the Messiah, the promised Seed of Abraham would be recognized when he came. However, they did not use the OT for that purpose but rather believed that it was given to show them how to live so God would like them. As Peter says the OT describes the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

12. What's the point of v. 25?

To go back to the law as the grounds of justification is to use it for a purpose for which it was not designed. The law is ended in its ability to condemn and to stimulate sin. Christ is the fulfillment of the law. The law points to Christ and we keep it by trusting in Christ, not by offering sheep every morning and evening, not by going through the cleanliness rituals, not by having priests and burning incense and candles, not by seeking to obey the 10 commandments so that God will love us, etc. The OT cannot be used as a rule of life for the Christian but rather it is the revelation of the one who has life and who is life, Jesus Christ. Its function is always to point us to Jesus. The OT is about Jesus; all of it and so if you read it as law that must be kept then you are reading it wrong. We don't need the law's shadows, we have the real thing, Christ. This doesn't mean I don't read it, rather it means that as I read it I'm seeing how Christ has fulfilled it and rejoicing in Christ, not in my keeping the law.

13. How has your view of the OT been challenged or changed by studying this passage?

The OT and its commandments fulfill a necessary role in God's saving people because only the law convinces humans that Christ is a sufficient Savior.