

GALATIANS 3:1-25

The Limitations of Living Under the Law and the Freedom Found in Faith

Memory Verse

"So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith."

Galatians 3:24

Real-life Problems

Following the Rules

Like the churches in Galatia, we often fall into legalistic tendencies. Rather than resting in His grace, we get restless about our identity in Christ, and we try to earn God's approval by so furiously following the rules—things like don't drink, don't do drugs, and don't have sex before marriage—that we lose sight of the beauty of the gospel.

The Good News

While we can never perfectly obey or live upright lives, we can take heart knowing that God does not judge us based on our performance. Instead, Jesus lived the perfect life and died the death we deserved so that we would not have to. Not only are we saved and justified by God's grace poured out on the cross, but we are freed from the law in our everyday lives, no longer slaves to the law but free to obey.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Can you think of a time when your friends convinced you to do something you didn't want to do (either for better or for worse)?

Idea #2: Have you ever had a babysitter? Have you ever babysat anyone else? What is the funniest thing that's happened to you while babysitting or being babysat?

Idea #3: When we're kids, we make up and play lots of games with our friends. Do you remember ever playing with someone who cheated or changed the rules once they started losing?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Galatians?

The apostle Paul wrote Galatians. In the early church, an apostle was someone sent with divine authority, and Paul received his message directly from Jesus (Gal 1:12, 15-23).

2) Who was the original audience?

Paul wrote "to the churches in Galatia" (v. 2), indicating a number of churches scattered throughout the region of Galatia in central Turkey. Many members of Paul's original audience were Gentile converts to Christianity.

3) Why was the letter to the Galatians written?

Paul wrote to correct and encourage the churches, which had been divided by theological and racial issues because of false teachers.

What's going on?

REMIND

Last week, Paul continued to establish his own authority by recounting his visit to Jerusalem and encounters with the other apostles. While the unity of the gospel was affirmed, Paul had to call out Peter for allowing racial prejudices to cloud how he treated Gentile Christians. Lastly, Paul reminded us of the true message of the gospel, that we are justified by faith through God's grace.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

With his authority established, Paul turns his attention back to the Galatians and their confusion. They had been misled by false teachers insisting on adherence to Jewish law. Rather than living by faith, the Galatians have been trying to add to their salvation by following the law. By reminding the Galatians about the original purposes of the law, Paul invites them to embrace the freedom promised in Christ, obeying willingly, out of gratitude rather than fear.

- 1) Galatians have been led astray by false teachers emphasizing adherence to Jewish law (vv. 1-14)
- 2) Living by faith, not under the law (vv. 7-14)
- 3) The original purpose of the law and the daily life of a Christian (v. 15-25)

Read

Read **Galatians 3:1-25** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How does Paul begin Chapter 3? What is his tone?

He's upset! Like we saw in Chapter 1, he's frustrated with the Galatians for being misled, and he's not pulling any punches.

2) What questions does Paul ask in verses 2-6? What answers does he imply?

He asks a series of rhetorical questions that build on one another. By not providing the answers directly, Paul indicates that he believes the answers are obvious:

- Did they receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? By faith!
- They began their Christian lives by the Spirit, so are they perfected by their human effort? No, by faith!
- Was their suffering as Christians clinging to the true gospel all for nothing? No!
- Does God, who gave them the Spirit and performs miracles, give these gifts because of works of the law or by faith? By faith!
- Did Abraham live by works of the law or by faith? By faith!

3) Who does Paul use as an example in verse 6? How did he live, and what was "counted" to him?

Paul points to Abraham, the father of Israel. Abraham lived by faith—he "believed God"—and this faith (not his obedience) was counted to him as righteousness.

4) According to verses 10-11, who is cursed? Who became cursed for our sake (v. 13)? What does it mean to be cursed?

Anyone who relies or lives under the law is cursed. On the cross, Jesus became cursed so that we could be set free and be blessed. While being "cursed" might sound a little strange to us today, in Paul's time, this was a very scary idea. This wasn't a curse from another human, but rather a curse from God Himself.

5) What are some of the purposes of the law given in verses 19-24?

First, God gave the law because of human sin. The law worked like a spotlight to reveal the sinfulness of man (vv. 19,22).

Second, the law highlights that we are incapable of being perfect like God. No matter how close we come to following the law, we are never perfect, and we are always sinful. The law reminds us of our need for God (v. 22).

Third, the law is like a captor, imprisoning us (v. 23).

Lastly, the law is like a guardian or a tutor, offering temporary instruction for us (vv. 24-25).

B. SO WHAT?

1) Why is Paul so upset with the Galatians in the first few verses? Based on Paul's questions, what do you think the Galatians were trying to do? What is wrong with their approach?

They have abandoned and twisted the essence of the gospel. By adding human requirements—keeping the Jewish ceremonial laws—to God's grace, they had also forgotten how to live as God's people. To use a theological word, they were trying to "sanctify" themselves by their own efforts; they were trying to "perfect" themselves by following the law (v. 3). Instead of resting in the knowledge that Jesus had already declared them holy, and that their identity was secure, they feared that they were not good enough in God's eyes. In their fear, they believed that in order to be declared holy, Jesus's sacrifice was not enough: they also needed to follow the Jewish laws. This legalistic rule-following minimizes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, His payment on our behalf. By trying to add our own efforts to God's declaration of righteousness, we seek to replace our need for God with our own actions.

Check Please

Have you ever gone out to eat with your friends? At some restaurants, you pay at the counter when you order. After ordering, you pay, sit down, and eat your food. It would be quite strange for the waiter to come to your table and ask you to pay again, wouldn't it?

Let's take it one step further. Imagine eating at a restaurant and asking for the check—only to have your waiter inform you that someone has already paid the bill for you. **What would be your response? Would you be grateful, or would you insist that you needed to pay the check yourself? Would you feel the need to find who paid the bill and pay them back?**

It would be foolish to pay your own bill twice, but it would be even crazier to refuse someone else's generosity and pay the bill on top of the gift you already received! In many ways, this is how God's grace works. We owe a massive, massive debt for our sin. And yet, by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God picked up the tab for us! **Why, then, would we try to add to His generous grace with our own feeble efforts? Are we afraid that God didn't truly pay it all? Or are we afraid to trust Him rather than ourselves?**

2) Why does Paul use Abraham as an example in verse 6? What does it mean that "Abraham believed God, and it was counted as righteousness"? If Abraham was saved by faith through God's grace, why do we need Jesus?

As the father of the Jewish people, Abraham was one of the most beloved and respected people in Jewish tradition. Because Paul's opponents (the Judaizers) were Jewish Christians advocating for strict obedience to Mosaic law, Abraham was an especially powerful case study.

Moreover, Abraham was a perfect example of someone saved and sanctified by faith and not works. Scripture says that Abraham believed God—he didn't just believe in God, but he actually believed God's word and trusted His promises for Abraham (specifically that God would give him an heir and countless offspring in Genesis 15:1-6). He trusted God, and this faith was counted or credited to him as righteousness. Abraham himself was a sinner (as we see evidenced throughout Genesis), but because of his faith, God treated Abraham as if he were righteous.

It is important to note that faith does not equal righteousness, but rather God declares Abraham to be righteous because he believed. Likewise, for us today, we cannot achieve righteousness on our own. We can only receive it from God, by faith in Jesus, because it is Christ's righteousness that we receive, not our own. Our own sinful, human efforts can't add anything to Jesus' perfect righteousness.

3) How is living under the law different from living by faith (vv. 9-14)? Why are those living under the law "cursed"?

To be cursed stands in contrast to being blessed: saved, redeemed, and renewed by God's grace. Those who are cursed are separated and removed from God.

In his younger years, Paul lived under the law, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not escape his sinfulness. Everyone who lives under the law is cursed because no one can perfectly fulfill and uphold the law. Those who live under the law continue to seek justification and righteousness by the law. They try to be saved by their good works—to earn God's reward with their performance. They are cursed.

On the other hand, those who live by faith, like Abraham, trust in God's faithfulness rather than their own strength. Resting in God's grace, they can obey and follow God willingly, out of gratitude and love. When we trust that Christ became cursed for us, separated from God on the cross to bear the weight of OUR sin, we can faithfully follow God, obeying Him from a place of acceptance rather than working for His acceptance.

4) What is the point of Paul's analogy in verses 15-18? What does this tell us about the law? About God's covenant with Abraham?

By comparing God's covenant with man to the terms of a man-made contract, Paul simplifies God's covenant with Abraham for us. Four hundred fifty years before God gave the law to Moses, God made a pact, or a covenant, with Abraham. God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness nearly a half-century before the law was given to Moses. In a human contract, we don't add stipulations to an agreement after the agreement has been made. That's not fair. Likewise, God didn't change the rules of the covenant after Abraham died. From the very start, God has desired our faith, not our works.

5) If we no longer need it, why did God give the law in the first place? What does it mean that we were "imprisoned" under the law? That it was a "guardian"? What does it mean that we are set free in Christ? (vv. 19-24)

Encourage students to brainstorm and imagine what it means to be imprisoned. What images come to mind? What would it feel like to be imprisoned? When we seek to be justified and deemed righteous by the moral law, we are burdened by its demands, and ultimately, by its curse. In many ways, trying to live under the law (seeking salvation through obeying the law) is like chaining yourself to a treadmill and turning up the speed. You've allowed yourself to be stuck with a requirement that you can't keep up with: you won't be able to run forever. It's impossible. But you've chained yourself, and you didn't even have to!

The moral law was never meant to save us; God gave it to Moses as a guardian and a teacher—not as a savior—because humans were so sinful. According to Martin Luther, the Mosaic law has two purposes, to "bridle wickedness" and "reveal unto a man his sin." Theologian R.C. Sproul (with the agreement of many other theologians) adds a third purpose of the law, that it "reveals to us what is pleasing to God." Still, it does not bring us any closer to God, and instead, can make us fearful about where we stand before God.

As a "guardian" or a "tutor," the law instructs us and prepares us for life when we are no longer under the law. The moral teachings of the law are good things to follow, and we should continue to live obediently (see Gal 5:16-25). While we are no longer bound by the covenant to follow the entirety of Old Testament law, the moral law (most clearly revealed through the Ten Commandments) points us to God's character, and to how He created us. New Testament writers like Paul affirm the moral law as a guide for how we are called to live, but it is by no means the way of our salvation. The law trains us and guides us when we live by faith; we simultaneously know how God calls us to live, and we are confident that we are saved by His grace and not our works. We are freed from the curse and bondage to the law, and we no longer have to live with fear or anxiety about our obedience, but we can still follow the good things God teaches us through the law.

It may be helpful at this point to revisit "Tough Topic: The Law" in the introduction.

6) Is Paul saying that obedience doesn't matter? Should we throw moral teachings like the Ten Commandments out the window and do whatever we want?

Not at all. Growing up in a family, your parents raise you and train you for how to live when you grow up. The law, as our guardian, works similarly. God still calls us to obey, and we are to seek Him rather than live in sin, but we cannot be made righteous by our obedience. Instead, when we believe God, as Abraham did, and when we recognize the depth of our sin and the beauty of His grace, obedience will become our natural inclination. We are not defined by our obedience, but God uses obedience to sanctify us, to make us more like Him.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Ask students to fill in the blank. "I will be ok/affirmed/loved (by God, others, or myself) if I can just _____?"

Get into college. Get into THAT college. Make the team. Nail the audition. Get the boy. Get the girl. Hang out with that group. Be a good person. Go to Bible study. Volunteer my time. The list could go on and on.

2) What does obedience mean to you? Why do you obey in the first place? What motivates you to abide by the rules or guidelines set forth by God, parents, or other authority figures?

3) By the blood of Jesus, God has freed you from any need to perform, because your identity as His child is secure. Does this feel freeing? Or does it make you nervous? Do you feel welcomed to obey, tempted to rebel, or unwilling to let go of your own efforts?

Main takeaway

Like the Galatians, we often try to add to God's saving grace with our own performance and good behavior. The moral laws given by Moses, however, were never meant as a means of salvation, but as a guardian and a spotlight to show us our complete sinfulness. Living under the law will only lead to pain and emptiness. In contrast, the gospel frees us and invites us to rest in God's justifying and sanctifying work in our hearts, rather than our own efforts.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

While we can never perfectly obey or live upright lives, we can take heart knowing that God does not judge us based on our performance. Instead, Jesus lived the perfect life and died the death we deserved so that we would not have to. Not only are we saved and justified by God's grace poured out on the cross, but we are freed from the law in our everyday lives. We are no longer slaves to the law but are free to obey.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, forgive us for trying to earn Your approval with our own moral behavior. Help us to rest in Your boundless grace and approval, and obey You out of gratitude and adoration. We thank You for the cross, for Jesus' sacrifice in our place, and for the freedom we have in You alone. Amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Take a few moments to think quietly to yourself. What dominates your thoughts these days? What are you seeking above all else? Is it a friendship, award, grade, or something completely different? If you achieve or reach this goal, will you finally be fulfilled?
- 2) Think of one way that you struggle to obey God. If Jesus were in the room with you right now, what would He say to you? What would His tone of voice be? After you make a huge mistake, how would Jesus treat you? Take a few moments to talk to Him in prayer (because He *is* in the room!), and ask Him to transform your heart to obey out of love rather than fear.
- 3) Are you fearful about losing God's favor based on your successes and failures? By doing "good" or doing "bad"? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What distractions might pull you away from the gospel individually, and as a family? How can you collectively remain anchored in gospel truths?
- 2) What does it mean that we are not in bondage to the law anymore? Take a few moments to share with one another where you struggle to let go of legalistic obedience to the law?
- 3) As a family, what would it look like to faithfully and eagerly obey God's laws, rather than fearful and performance-oriented obedience?