

Galatians 3v15-29

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Galatians chapter 3, we're going to look at verses 15 to 25, and we're doing an Advent series! in the evening and from next week we'll do some Advent stuff in the mornings. Galatians 3, 15 to 25.

Let me again plug just Tabletalk Magazine. I think it's a brilliant magazine on helping us get into the Bible and read the scriptures every day. The articles are terrific and in fact I wish I'd written, I wish I'd read these articles before this sermon. And so there's some very, very helpful stuff on Faith Alone, the differences between Biblical Christianity and Orthodoxy and Biblical Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church. And so take one, take two, take as many as you can use. I think it's a terrific magazine. In June of 1520, three years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 thesis to the door, the castle door in Wittenberg, Martin Luther was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. He was condemned by the Pope, condemned as a heretic, officially. And so Luther was forbidden to preach and teach. By way of response, Martin Luther, who by all accounts is pretty fiery, published three books.

The first book was on the Christian nobility of the German nation. It was a masterpiece. If there's one way to get the Germans behind you in the Protestant Reformation is to say, well, you're not Italians, are you? And it was a brilliant, brilliant book. It was a masterpiece, politically. The second book that he wrote in 1520 was The Babylonian Captivity of the Church. It is a no-holds-barred expose of the Roman Catholic Church and its abuses. You feel like you want to wear a safety helmet when you read it. And then thirdly, he wrote a little book called The Freedom of the Christian.

You can still buy it today. There are those who say that The Freedom of the Christian by Martin Luther is one of the great pieces of literature in Western civilization. And in that little book, he makes two propositions. Number one, that a Christian, somebody who has put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, is an utterly free man. Lord of all and subject to none. But secondly, he says that a Christian is an utterly dutiful man. The servant of all and subject of all. A free man, Lord of all, subject to no one.

[2 : 45] A dutiful man. A dutiful man. Subject, a servant of all and subject to all. And it's the first of those prepositions that I think Galatians chapter 3 verses 15 to 25 is all about. That if you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in him alone, you are free. The Lord of all, subject to none.

Perhaps the key verse in the book of Galatians is chapter 5 verse 1. Can you see that? For freedom, Christ has set us free. For freedom, Christ has set us free. The theme tune of Galatians is freedom. Freedom from the tyranny of the law. Freedom from the laws of men.

Freedom from a guilty conscience. Freedom from the laws which the church imposes upon us. Freedom from the laws of the Judaizers of Paul's day that they were imposing. Freedom from the law as a means of justification.

As a means of getting right with God. It is for freedom that Jesus Christ has set us free. There were those who turned up in the Galatian church. They were infiltrators.

And they were deeply suspicious of the apostle Paul and his message. Of what he was preaching and what he was doing. The church is made up largely of non-Jewish Gentile Christians.

[4 : 24] And these infiltrators, these Judaizers, were insisting, it's not enough to believe in the Lord Jesus. It's not enough to believe in the Lord Jesus. There are certain religious rites that you have to do.

You have to obey certain ceremonial laws. Like circumcision and food laws. And the Sabbath laws. And feast day laws. And you have to do that in order to be made right with God.

To be justified. It was insufficient. It was not enough to believe in Jesus. You need to do something extra. And it was that which led Paul to cite Father Abraham in Genesis 15.

Abraham was the father of the Jews. Do you remember the infiltrators, the Judaizers, were saying you've got to get back to Moses. You've got to get back to the law. And Paul says I see you Moses and I raise you to Abraham, the father of the Jews.

And what Genesis 15 and verse 6 says that Abraham, the father of the Jews, he believed. He believed in God's promises.

[5 : 32] And it was reckoned to him. It was credited to him as righteousness. It was through the instrument of faith in the promise that God had made that God counted Abraham as righteous.

God reckoned Abraham as a law keeper. And so the question is then, or what is the function of the law?

If you're possible, Paul is saying, we are saved apart from the law, apart from works, apart from obedience, apart from our trying. We are made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and apart from obedience on our part, what is the point of the law?

What is its purpose? Look at verse 19 of chapter 3. Why then the law? Why then the law? And Paul gives us two answers.

One is negative and one is positive. So first of all, let's look at the negative answer. What the law cannot do. What the law cannot do.

[6 : 47] The law of God cannot annul the promise of God. The law of God cannot undo the gospel of God, the good news of God.

At whatever place, at whatever function the law had, it cannot subvert the gospel. You can't leave justification by faith alone behind.

There were those in the church in Galatia, just like there are those today, who suggest something like this. That the gospel brings you to the front door. That the gospel enables you to put your feet on the front step.

But in order to keep going, in order to reach the end, it is entirely of works. Do you remember when you were slightly nervous of going to someone's house? You were being dropped off by your parents.

And your parents would say, listen, I'll drive you to the steps. But you've got to get out and knock the door yourself. You've got to go in yourself. I'll take you as far as I can take you, but then it's up to you.

[7 : 58] You've got to go in. And there were people that were saying, that is what the Bible's message is. The gospel gets you to the point where it gets you on the front step. But in order to keep going as a Christian, in order to reach the end, well then it's about what you do.

It's about our obedience. And Paul is addressing that here. That fundamental, pharisaical spirit. And all of us are recovering Pharisees in some form or another.

All of us revert to that religious Pharisee mode. And Paul is addressing that issue. That you begin by faith and then you are made perfect by the works, by flesh.

You begin by the spirit, but you are made perfect by the flesh. And so he raises this example. And it's an example of history from Abraham.

And he says in verse 15, can you see it? I'll give you a human example. Paul, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified.

[9 : 08] And the word there for covenant is a word called *diatheke*. It's quite a prominent word in Greek in the New Testament. And there are people who say, what Paul has in mind here is not so much God's covenant, but a last will and testament.

And there's a raging debate. Hundreds of PhDs have been written on it. Whether it should be rendered covenant, or last will and testament. And if it's last will and testament, there are kind of different choices.

Was Paul thinking of the way Romans did last wills and testaments? Or was he thinking about the way Greeks did last wills and testaments? They're different. If he was thinking of a Greek last will and testament, it was very clear that once the will had been made and the testament had been made and had been signed and ratified and placed in the depository, it could not be changed.

It could not be annulled. It could not be broken. It could not be tampered with. It's a minister I know quite well in Wales and very foolishly, when he was asked to be an executor of an old lady in his church, he said, yes, never agree to that if you're a minister.

It was a total disaster. As she left her entire estate between the church, 50% went to the church and 50% went to her family. When she died, of course the family found out about this and they were incensed.

[10:29] They were absolutely furious. They contested it. They went to the local press. They were furious that 50% of their mother's estate went to the church and they contested it.

They contested the way that the will had been drawn up. After endless hassle and it being in the local papers, about a month later, the lawyer called my friend and said, I've looked into it and the will cannot be altered.

The will was entered into legally, it was ratified legally and it cannot be changed. And to the boot, I've charged the family £1,000 for the decision.

Can you imagine, it made things a whole lot worse. The point is this. The illustration is saying this. Once a will has been done, it cannot be changed. And once someone has died, then the will certainly cannot be changed.

So it could be that, or perhaps Paul doesn't have the last will and testament in mind, but as the ESV suggests, he has God's covenant.

[11:36] And the point about God's covenant is this. His word, God's word, can never be broken. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

And when God gives his word, it is utterly and completely trustworthy. And so he's talking about God's covenant with Abraham that we read of in Genesis 12 and then the covenant in Genesis 12 is ratified in Genesis 15.

It's confirmed. In Genesis 12, actually, the word covenant does not appear. But in Genesis 15, he speaks about the covenant that's already been made.

And so we can defer from that, can't we, that what God did in Genesis 12 is a covenant with Abraham. Abraham. And in that covenant, God promised to Abraham land and seed and children and that his children would be like the stars in the sky and like the sand on the seashore.

In chapter 15, he ratifies that covenant. He confirms it. And that covenant would eventually produce the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:49] And Paul makes what is a rather obscure kind of exegetical point. He kind of looks and sees something that we wouldn't initially see from Genesis 12 and verse 15.

That when God made the promise to Abraham, he said, to you and your offspring, singular. Now there's a sense which that promise that God made to Abraham was to his children and to his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren after them.

It's part of the argument of why we baptise children, that God's promises always include the children of believers, that children are included within the covenant. But the Apostle Paul looks at it and he draws this one particular point.

He says it's singular. And the fulfilment of the promise in Genesis 12, 15, 17 is ultimately found in the Lord Jesus Christ. So let me tell you the story of Genesis 15.

Do you remember how God confirmed how he ratified his covenant? In Genesis 15, we're told that Abraham was to take a cow and a goat and a ram and a dove and he was to cut those animals in half.

[14:07] And he was to cut them in half and then he was to separate the two halves from each other to leave a path for people to walk through between the carcasses. And it's at that point that Abraham falls fast asleep.

into a deep sleep. And then do you remember what happened in Genesis 15 where he told that a smoking furnace, a firepot, came down. It was symbolic of God's presence.

And so God's presence comes down while Abraham is in a deep sleep and the firepot, the symbol of God's presence, passes between the severed pieces.

there's a covenant made but one of the parties of the covenant is fast asleep and the other party of the covenant walks through.

Now when they walk through those severed pieces of animals, what were they saying? They were saying in that agreement that what has happened to these animals, it should fall on me, it should happen to me if I break this covenant.

[15:08] that if I break my promise, if I break my word, may what's happened to this cow cut in two happen to me. May I be cut in two. And so you have this incredible promise, don't you, that God makes where he takes both the blessings and the curses of the covenant upon himself and he says

if Abraham or I break this covenant, may the curse fall on me.

And where is Abraham? Fast asleep. God is saying if I fail to observe the terms of my covenant and if Abraham fails to observe the terms of the covenant, may the covenant curse fall on me.

It was a binding oath on God, on God's part for blessing and for curse. His word having been given and blood having been shed, that covenant cannot be nullified.

The law, Mount Sinai, came 430 years after that. 430 years. And so the Apostle Paul, he looks over the history of God's dealings with his people, of the history of redemption, and he says the law coming 430 years after that covenant with Abraham could not break the promise, could not annul the promise given to Abraham.

And so that God wasn't saying, well, it was by faith in Abraham's day, but now Moses' time has come and so it's the law and works. Paul is saying it has always been by faith alone.

[17:04] I remember being asked, as a kind of young Christian, how did Old Testament believers become Christians, if I can put it like that?

and I remember it was like a lightbulb moment. It was like a lightbulb moment. That they become Christians in exactly the same way that you and I do.

That by faith we look back to what Christ has done. By faith they grasp the promise and they look forward to what Christ has done. I think Paul is also speaking here in terms of Christian experience.

That we receive forgiveness of sins by faith in Jesus Christ and by faith in Jesus Christ alone. And we have to be absolutely clear because the drift of our hearts is the opposite way.

That we don't begin by faith and finish by works. We don't begin by the spirit and finish by the flesh. We don't get our foot in the door by the gospel and then it's entirely up to us.

[18:15] The promise was given to Abraham and it was a promise that at the heart of it a promise of Jesus. A promise of the provision of God in the gospel.

The law cannot undo justification by faith. The law cannot undo your right standing with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is not justification by faith and then sanctification by works. The law cannot undo the promise. It's a beautiful verse, verse 17.

You need to meditate on it this week. The law does not annul God's covenant. It's an amazing thing.

The law cannot undo the promise and so you look to the promise. But then secondly, Paul makes a positive statement. What can the law do?

[19:14] What does the law do? What then is the function of the law? If the law cannot undo the promise, what's the function of the law? Now the Reformation understood God's law in three ways.

It says there's three uses of the law. I know it's been hard work this morning but stick with me. First of all, it talks about the civil use of the law. And so the use of God's law in society, this is God's world, God's law.

The use of the law in framing society after the Ten Commandments. The rules and the regulations for ordinary society was God's law. And there's a sense in which God's law was given to bring civilization.

The use of the law in civil life to restrain public wickedness and maintain order in society. Of course you see that fully in the nation of Israel in the Old Testament but that still stands today.

We see the disaster that comes upon a country that gives itself up on God's law. But there's a second use of the law.

[20:28] And it's what we see here in the Apostle Paul. He says the law is a guardian or a pedagogue, a teacher. Then there's a third use of the law where it's a kind of didactic sense.

The law as a rule for life it is to guide our behavior as believers to reflect the blessings of the grace which we've received. It sets a pattern for the Christian law.

But what Paul is doing in verse 19 is he's saying about that second use of the law that it is a teacher, it is a guardian. it was added because of transgressions, rebellion.

It was added because of transgressions. There's a sense in which the law only multiplies our need. The law only multiplies our sinfulness. It only shuts us up.

Look at what it says in verse 22. He talks about the scriptures there. The scriptures imprisoned everything. The scripture imprisoned everything under sin so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

[21 : 35] When the law comes it demonstrates what sin is. When the law comes it magnifies our sin and our failure and our inability and our bondage.

There is a sense in which when the law comes all it does is kill and destroy and imprison. The world thinks in this way the world thinks that the obligation to do something implies the ability to do it. That's how the world thinks. The world thinks if you are obliged to do something then you must have the ability to do it. The Bible however flips that on its head.

You are under obligation but you cannot obey. That's the frustration isn't it? the difficulty of God's law is it says do this and you and I cannot do it.

The law says go here and you find yourself going in the opposite direction. And when the law came Paul here is speaking perhaps about the history of redemption but also when we speak about our experience this is how we experience the law.

[22 : 52] so think with me about Romans chapter 7 in fact come back with me to Romans chapter 7 Romans chapter 7 and verse 7 where Paul says this he says and what then shall we say Romans 7 verse 7 what then shall we say that the law is sin by no means yet if it had not been for the law I would not have known sin for I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had said you shall not covet but sin seizing an opportunity through the commandment produced in me all kinds of covetousness for apart from the law sin lies dead I was once alive apart from the law but when the commandment came sin came alive and I died what's he saying there he's!

talking about his life as a Pharisee as a religious man he's talking about his life before he became Christian he was alive once that's how he felt he felt he was alive a man full of vigour and moral power but then the law of God came and it convicted him and it incarcerated him and it put him in prison and shut him up and it showed the apostle Paul that he couldn't do what God was asking him to do it showed him his inability it showed him his sinfulness and his wretchedness it only demonstrated that he couldn't save himself when the law came he died he felt once he felt alive he felt he was full of life and vigour our friends who are not Christians they're not gloomy in the main they're not always down they are alive without the law and then the law comes when they understand it and it shows them their inability and it shows them their sinfulness and it shows them their need!

and it it's like being imprisoned it's like the rich young ruler he comes to Jesus and he says to Jesus this amazing question what must I do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says you know the ten commandments go and do them the rich young ruler says well all these I've kept since I was a boy he hasn't understood the law he feels he's!

he feels full of moral courage and virtue he says to Jesus all these I've kept since I was a boy was his problem he didn't understand it Paul talks in Philippians 3 concerning zeal he talks about his life before he became a Christian concerning zeal as to the law as to righteousness under the law blameless that's what I thought I was that's how I felt I felt alive and then the law and it handed me in and Paul uses two metaphors one of the metaphors that he uses is this metaphor of a pedagogue!

or a guardian! He uses the image of a prison guard but he also uses this metaphor of a pedagogue a pedagogue in Greek or Roman culture was a man usually was a slave and that slave would be hired to disciple and train and teach the child and he would go everywhere with him he would go to school with the child he would discipline the child all with a view to disciplining him that's what the law does it disciplines us the law hangs us in the law is like one of those sheep dogs in a sheep trial kind of biting on our feet trying to get us to where we need to go to and the law is like all of those restraints and you it pushes you and it prods you until you realise there is only one place to go and the only place that you can go the law teaches us is to

[27 : 00] Jesus Christ what does the law do the law drives us to Jesus Christ the law kicks away our self reliance and it drives us to faith and to faith alone and not just for our justification that's Paul's point it's not just for our justification the law cannot make you right with God but the law cannot sanctify you it cannot make you more holy there is a view isn't there in churches like ours where you're justified by faith but you're sanctified by the law and that is a disaster because we're never able to do it any obedience we are to offer to the law and we are to walk by the fruit of the Holy Spirit we do so by the strength and the power of the Holy Spirit in union and communion with Jesus Christ because apart from the Lord Jesus we can do nothing but there is a view isn't there that

Paul is addressing! here! those who begin by faith and that they are made perfect by the flesh and Paul says no that's nonsense it's a way of disaster and it's a way of ruin and so what is the function of the law some of you are wondering well what is the function of the law in the life of a Christian are Christians obligated to obey the Ten Commandments the answer to that is of course you've got to read Galatians chapter 5 verse 6 where Paul gives lots of prohibitions and lots of commands do this and don't do that but his point is this any obedience that we offer is not our obedience solely it is because we are united by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ and it's only because we are cleansed and forgiven and the promise has been given to us that cannot be annulled and cannot be taken away and so trusting in that promise we are free to obey

God's law and so he addresses you today you who have come this morning bowed down beneath a load of care and a load of guilt you who have come and you are aware that you've sinned and you've fallen short of the glory of God like all of us have and you've not done the things that you've promised to do and you've not lived up to the vows you made last Sunday and it weighs on you it weighs on you there is within each one of us a recovering pharisaical mode that operates in our minds there's a view in our minds that we've got from somewhere that Jesus brings us to the front door he opens the passenger side and he says you're on your own from now on the rest of life is entirely up to you but the law of God drives us to Jesus Christ and to the gospel and so we are justified by faith and we live by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ let's pray