

# "Why Our Works Can't Save Us"

*Galatians 3:15-29*

So far as we've been studying Paul's letter to the churches in the Roman province of Galatia, Paul has needed to defend his apostolic authority and the gospel. After he and Barnabas had shared the gospel and planted churches on their first ministry trip in Acts 13-14, a group of Jewish legalists had come after them and persuaded some of the Galatians that Gentile believers in Jesus still had to follow the Jewish laws. Obey the Sabbath, be circumcised, observe the holy days, eat certain meat and in specific ways.

When Paul heard this he was outraged and flabbergasted and wrote this letter under the leading of the Spirit to explain to these believers why they don't have to obey the Law anymore. Ch.'s 1-2 focus on the gospel's authenticity and his authority rooted in Jesus. Here in Ch.3 he has turned to the Law itself and why it failed to save you and why faith in Jesus is the only way. He explained in 3:1-14 that faith was always the path to God (as seen through Abraham) and that the Law itself pointed out that if you didn't keep it you were under the curse of sin. Which, Jesus voluntarily and sacrificially removed when He died on the cross. So why go back there? Here in vv.15-29 he continues pointing out why the Law could not save anyone.

All of us probably grew up in households where we had to obey rules. And every one of us probably didn't like those rules. We saw them as confining, unfair and an annoyance. So we broke them. Many of the rules were intended to keep us from harm or out of trouble. They acted as hedges of protection to guard us from potential dangers we may not have recognized. And many of us probably experienced those dangers because we 'jumped over the hedge'.

The rules themselves had no power to help us keep the rules. Sometimes they worked the opposite way. Sometimes we didn't know there was a risk or danger until we heard the rule. Perhaps your parent warned you to avoid a place or a person and you had no idea why, and you asked 'Why?' the answer was sometimes 'Because I said so.' Or 'You don't understand now but just trust me.' But knowledge of the rules didn't give us the power to keep the rules. And sometimes we could look like we were keeping the rules but we knew better. And often our parents really knew anyway.

This is sort of where Paul goes next when trying to help these misinformed believers in Jesus who now thought they had to add to their salvation by keeping the laws God gave to Israel for a specific time period. As if God is pleased by our keeping rules. Paul just used the example of Abraham as one who was justified by faith and declared right with God, so he comes back to Abraham through a different angle.

*<sup>15</sup> Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. <sup>16</sup> The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. <sup>17</sup> What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.*

While we don't know exactly what the Judaizers were claiming, some suggest they challenged Paul on his Abraham argument by stating, 'Yes, but God obviously felt Abraham's faith wasn't enough and that's why he added the Law through Moses.' But Paul counters that with the covenant with

Abraham was an unconditional covenant made by God alone. The Law given through Moses was a contract between two parties where God said 'If you keep these laws you'll get to enjoy the land and rain and my blessing.' We see this clearly in Deut. 28-29 where God spells out the 'if you do this, then I'll do this. But if you don't do this then I'll do that.' So Paul points out that the covenant God made with Abraham trumps the Law because

## **The Promises of God are Unalterable** **(3:15-18)**

'The example from everyday life' was how people use covenants and wills. *Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.* There's a little bit of confusion here and in v.19 because in both verses Paul uses the word "add" to mean different things. However, in the Greek they are two different words. This word for 'add to a human covenant' means 'alter' or 'rearrange'. If you make a will no one has the power to change that except for you yourself. So the Law with Moses doesn't change the promise made to Abraham. The promise isn't fulfilled until the 'seed' arrives. Which makes it even more unalterable

### ***Because the promise is fulfilled through His perfect Son (vv.15-16)***

Jesus is the One through whom Jews and Gentiles will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). Jesus is also the One through whom God's promises to Israel about land and descendants will be fulfilled. And because Jesus is still alive (and always will be) the promises are still intact and are still going to be completely fulfilled. So the Law does not alter or cancel the promise. God made the promise to Abraham in Gen. 15 when God walked alone between a severed heifer, goat and ram. Normally, both parties would walk between the animals as a way of saying 'should either of us break this covenant then we may be like these animals, cut in half.' But God alone walked through. He didn't ask Abraham to walk through them. God alone is going to fulfil the promise. And He would do it through the 'seed', Jesus.

So, no the Law does not set aside the covenant previously established by God; the promise still stands and always stands. Therefore God's promises,

### ***Are not earned through keeping laws (v.17)***

God made an unconditional promise to Abraham, who believed God by faith in God's ability and character to do what He said He would do. That's all God required. So, if Jesus (the Seed through whom the promises of God are fulfilled) says eternal life is available to us who believe in Him, we have it. We don't have to keep laws to get it. Faith alone by God's grace saves us. This is what Paul says next,

*<sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.*

### ***An inheritance can only be received by grace (v.18)***

An inheritance is a gift. It's not something you earn. God gave His promise to Abraham by grace alone just as the gospel is by grace alone. We can't earn an inheritance from God. We can only accept it by faith believing that Jesus became the curse for us on the tree/cross to remove the penalty and the shame of our sin that separates us from God.

Now Paul anticipates an obvious question, why did God feel it necessary to give the Law to Moses and the Israelites? What was its purpose? It has many, but for now Paul says we have to be clear,

## **The Law of God was Never Intended to Save** **(3:19-25)**

*It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. <sup>20</sup> A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. <sup>21</sup> Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.*

The Law couldn't save anyone. All those rules were impossible to keep. Constant sin required constant sacrifices. Every time you turned around you broke a Law. What was the point? That's the point! The Law was

### ***A constant reminder of one's need for a Saviour (vv.19-21)***

No one could keep all the laws. The book of Hebrews points this out quite clearly. The priests never sat down. Their work was never finished. But Jesus sat down at the right hand of God when His work on the cross was completed. His was the blood sacrifice that God required for sins to be paid for. The blood of animals could never take away sin. But, they were a constant pointer toward the need for a perfect sacrifice. The Lamb of God provided by God Himself.

Paul continues:

*<sup>22</sup> But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.*

*<sup>23</sup> Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

*<sup>25</sup> Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.*

The word for 'locked up' means imprisoned.

### ***The Law was a jailer until Christ came (vv.22-25)***

When Paul says 'Scripture' declares we're all under sin, he's referring back to v.10 where he referred to the Law itself saying in Deut. 27:26 that everyone who can't keep the Law is cursed. When Paul established his proof in Romans 3 that we were all sinners and fall short of the glory of God he proves it by quoting eight Old Testament verses. Somewhere along the line Israel lost sight of how the Law said you can't keep all the laws and so many were blind to what Jesus came to do.

So the Law prepared people to look for God's answer. And He gave enough clues in the Old Testament about His Servant the Messiah taking on our iniquities upon Himself through whose stripes we would find healing for sin (Is. 53). And that Jesus pointed these things out showing how faith in Him was all God required. Once Jesus died for our sins, the Law was finished. It had served its purpose and now was no longer necessary. Now what?

Since the Judaizers emphasized that one had to become Jewish in order to please God, Paul has to show how God no longer distinguishes people based on race, sex, social status. Instead God looks at us the same because we are in Christ.

*<sup>26</sup> You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

Paul, a Jew, says there's something better than being 'Jewish'. He says

## **Faith in Christ Means Identification in Christ** **(3:26-29)**

The issue Paul was defending was believing Gentiles were just as valued as believing Jews. Faith in Jesus Christ puts all of us in a right relationship with God. Which means we are all equally valued by God. 'The Chosen People' are not valued more by God, they were uniquely given the first chance at getting to know God. This should humble you not make you proud, if you understand that all of us are sinners undeserving of God's grace and mercies. All believers are now adopted by God the Father and we have equal status as sons. In Roman culture an adopted son has the same rights as a blood line son. This is the word picture here. It is about being valued. Roman culture divided everyone in social status.

There was **The Emperor** as Head of Roman society and ruler of all Rome; the **Patricians**, wealthy families who owned lots of land and influenced government; the **Senators** who served in the Senate and governed Rome; The **Equestrians**, also wealthy landowners but who chose business over politics. **Plebeians**, the working class. Roman born with citizen status but without substantial wealth who worked for their living at jobs such as artisans, craftsmen, bakers etc. **Freed Slaves**, slaves who had either been given their freedom or had paid for their freedom and now worked for their living. And **Slaves**, often prisoners of war orphans who were owned by their master.

But faith in Jesus helps us see our value in God. And the challenge for every believer is

### ***Now we need to show Christ is in (vv.26-27)***

'Baptized' always means immersed. When one is immersed in water one disappears. You can't be seen. You are fully immersed. This is what Paul is saying metaphorically when we are saved we have all of Christ and His Spirit and now we are capable of living an obedient life such that people see Jesus in us. Am I so 'immersed' in Jesus that I act like Him and speak like Him and respond like Him? That's what it means to be in Christ.

'Clothed ourselves with Christ' is another favourite metaphor for a believer. We are to dress like Jesus; to put Him on in thought, word and actions. Clothing is what people see. Do we show Jesus? We all are able to do that if we have believed in Jesus, whether Jew, Greek, male, female, slave or free. This verse is often used out of context to describe equality of roles. That's not the context here. Paul is talking about how God values us equally. Likewise,

### ***We need to value one another as Christ's (vv.28-29)***

That was the challenge Paul was facing. Jews overvalued themselves claiming God favoured them and that's why some were forcing Gentile believers to live like Jews. Paul moves beyond that and says there is no difference in the value between a man and a woman nor is there a difference in value between a slave and a non-slave. Paul is not talking about roles here because you can't change whether you are Jew or Greek, nor can you change whether you are male or female and it was very difficult (unless you came into money) to change from slave to free. I think there were some believers who thought they should change their roles because of their faith. But listen to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:17-24,

*<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. <sup>18</sup> Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. <sup>19</sup> Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. <sup>20</sup> Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. <sup>21</sup> Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. <sup>22</sup> For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup> You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. <sup>24</sup> Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*

Our value isn't found in our jobs or roles or maleness or femaleness. Our value is found in God alone. We are Christ's because Christ is in us. And that alone should change the way we value one another. No one is superior over anyone else. We are equally valued by God. Don't find your value in your role or job or your family or your Facebook friends but in Christ. And treat all God's people as those in whom Christ dwells. We are all heirs according to the promise God originally made to Abraham.

Do you see how bad theology makes for bad spiritual practices? The Judaizers taught that you had to be a 'Jew' in order to please God. Which meant they saw themselves as superior to others and were teaching that God did the same. Paul said 'Don't do that!' No one is better than others because no one can save themselves since the Law proved we are all Lawbreakers. Everyone needs to trust in God's promises by faith. Paul's using Abraham's faith as the example to follow, not his race. Abraham looked forward to God's promises being fulfilled. Moses was given the Law to help people look forward in faith to when God would deal completely with their sins through the Messiah.

And we are looking forward to when Jesus will return and fulfil all God's promises made to Abraham, to Israel and to the church. One day His rule will be visible. Our faith will be rewarded, the full version of His Kingdom will be established and the glory of the Lord will fill the earth. We will all equally share in that because we are all in Christ and Christ is in all who believe. Let's treat each other a little more kindly, respectfully and humbly as those in whom Jesus dwell.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us  
at [oliviet@rideau.net](mailto:oliviet@rideau.net)