

Why the Law?

[Galatians 3:19-22](#)

This is our 14th message in the book of Galatians. By now I hope that you are aware that this book is dealing with legalism. There were those in Galatia who were saying it wasn't enough to trust Christ, but felt they had to keep the Law. This book is very relevant to us today, because legalism is still a danger to the church. As a matter of fact, legalism is a greater menace to the church than alcoholism. We all are aware of the damage alcoholism can do. If we don't know someone who is an alcoholic, we certainly have read about the death and destruction that it causes. Alcoholics are in a tragic bondage. But legalism is more subtle and more pervasive and, in the end, more destructive. Thus, we must do all we can to understand this book and apply its principles to our lives.

In our last study we looked at the theological content of the Abrahamic covenant and the historical and theological relationship between that covenant and the law of Moses. Paul demonstrated the unconditional nature of the promises made to Abraham. He pointed out the incompatibility between receiving the inheritance as a gift on the basis of a promise and receiving it as a payment for keeping the law.

In our text this morning Paul answers the critics questions that are rambling around in their heads. Paul's line of argument goes like this: "If salvation has always been a gift from God, by faith, for those who believe, and never by works, and if the covenant promised to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, what purpose did the Law have?" Great question, and the answer is found in:

Galatians 3:19 (NASB) Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made.

"Why the Law then?" This question reflects Paul's awareness that his argument so far would lead his readers to wonder whether he has denied any purpose to the law. If the inheritance of the promised blessing does not depend on the law, as Paul has just declared (v. 18), then why was the law given by God?

Paul's answer is important for us as we wrestle with similar questions regarding the application of the Mosaic law. How Christians should relate to the Mosaic law today is a question that many believers don't know how to answer. Do you?

Thus far in Galatians Paul has made it clear that salvation is by grace through faith and not on the basis of human obedience to divine imperatives, so why did God give the Law? Was God wasting His time in carving His commandments in stone and delivering them to His chosen people?

According to Paul, the law has a **negative** purpose: "... *It was added because of transgressions...*" What does he mean? Those who hold to a lordship view of soteriology may see in this statement an affirmation of their dogma; for, say they, "This verse shows that the law was added because sin was getting out of hand, and it needed to be curbed. Therefore, God gave the law to control sin." Let me ask you a question, "Does the law control sin?" No! It certainly does not. It does just the opposite:

Romans 5:20 (NASB) And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

According to Paul, the Law made the transgression increase! Because of the sinfulness of my heart, when I see a line drawn I want to cross over it. In this sense, the law makes sin abound, because it draws many clear lines between right and wrong that my sinful heart wants to break. Therefore, the law makes me sin more - but not because there is anything wrong in the law, only because there is something deeply wrong in the human condition.

The word "**transgressions**" is the Greek word *parabasis*. It is an interesting word. It is not just a synonym for sin. It's a very specific word. It is used 7 just times in the New Testament. It has the meaning of: "violations of clearly marked boundaries." This word is used in:

1 Timothy 2:14 (NASB) And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression [parabasis].

Eve violated a clearly marked boundary - she ate the forbidden fruit. Paul makes its meaning of *parabasis* clear in:

Romans 4:15 (NASB) for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation [parabasis].

If there is not a law, there cannot be a transgression. So before the Law of Moses was given, did men transgress? One cannot transgress what does not exist. Without a clearly marked boundary, there can be sin but not transgression. You may be thinking, "How can there be sin without transgression?"

Romans 5:12 (NASB) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned

Has a one day old baby transgressed any laws? No! He has personally broken no law. Has a one day old baby sinned? Let me put it this way: Is a one day old baby born spiritually dead? Yes. Why? Every baby is born spiritually dead, because "all sinned" in Adam.

So, did men transgress before the Law was given? Yes. While the law was given in written form only beginning with Moses, it had been in existence right from the very beginning. Abel and Cain knew, for instance, that they had to offer sacrifices. God pronounced judgment on Cain for killing Able, because killing was a transgression. The first thing Noah did after the flood was to build an altar unto the Lord and offer burnt offerings thereon. And Joseph, when tempted by Potiphar's wife, responded:

Genesis 39:9 (NASB) "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?"

How could he sin against God if God had not given him commands? Evidently, God had told them what they should or should not do, and that their sins, their failures to follow all His commands, had to be atoned for.

The law provides the objective standard by which the violations are measured. In order for sinners to know how sinful they really are, how far they deviate from God's standards, God gave the law.

Before the law was given, there was sin. But after the law was given, sin could be clearly specified and measured:

Romans 3:20 (NASB) because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

The Law tells us what sin is, it spells it out.

Romans 7:7 (NASB) What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."

Once the Law was given, each act or attitude could then be labeled as a transgression of this or that commandment of the law.

At first reading, it might appear from verse 19 that the Law was given in response to man's great sin. Paul's words are translated, "It was added **because of** transgressions." While it is grammatically possible to interpret Paul's words to convey the thought that the Law was given as a result of man's sin, here it is better to understand the Law as the means which God has employed to make sin evident.

Thus, the phrase "**because of transgressions**" must mean that God wanted to move sin into the specific category of flagrant violation of the expressed and clear will of God. Thus, the law was added to create transgressions - that is, to make sin clearly a specific act of rebellion against God.

So, God gave the Law - to make men aware of the depths of their rebellion against Him. God didn't give the Law to make man aware of his disobedience so that he would cease it and begin to obey, but to show him he could not obey.

Augustine said, "God gives us commands we cannot keep that we might know how much we need him."

Imagine a state in which there are many traffic accidents but no traffic laws. Although people are driving in dangerous, harmful ways, they may not know it and cannot be held responsible for it until the legislature issues a book of traffic laws. Then it is possible for the police to cite drivers for transgressions of the traffic laws. The laws define harmful ways of driving as violations of standards set by the legislature. The function of traffic laws is to allow bad drivers to be identified and prosecuted.

So, the purpose of the Law was negative - it made men aware of their sinfulness. Not only was the Law negative, it was also **temporary**. The word "*added*" implies that the law was not a central theme in God's redemptive plan; it was supplementary and secondary to the enduring covenant made with Abraham. As the word *added* marks the beginning point for the Mosaic law, the word *until* marks its end point. The Mosaic Law came into effect at a certain point in history and was in effect only until the promised Seed appeared.

Paul states the temporary framework of the Law by stating, "*...until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made.*" The "seed" has already been identified in verse 16 as "Christ." Now, the promise of an eternal inheritance (v.18) was not made indiscriminately to any and all men. Rather, it was made to Abraham and Christ. Please note that under inspiration Paul states that the promise, referring to the Abrahamic covenant, was made with Christ. The true, full meaning of the

Abrahamic covenant was not to Israel, but to Christ and all those in Him by faith. The law was added until Christ came with the new covenant.

There is a contrast here between the permanent validity of the promise and the temporary nature of the law. On the one hand, the promise was made long before the law and will be in effect long after the period of the law; on the other hand, the law was in effect for a relatively short period of time limited in both directions by the words *added* and *until*.

Now let's look at the phrase in the middle of this verse, "*...having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator...*"

The word "angels" in this passage is translated from the Greek *aggelos*, which can also be translated: "messengers." Speaking of John the Baptist, for instance, Jesus says:

Matthew 11:10 (NASB) "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER [aggelos] BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'

Because of this some teach that we should substitute the word "messengers" in this verse for angels. Because they say that there is no mention in the Old Testament of angels at the giving of the Law.

Remember what we said last week about the New Testament being a divine commentary on the Old? When the New Testament authors comment on an Old Testament passage, they do not give an interpretation, but THE interpretation. The New Testament interprets the Old. So, even if we don't see angels in the giving of the Law in the Old Testament, we do in the New.

When we look at some of the New Testament writings, we find that it was commonly taught that the Law did not come to Israel straight from God. For instance, in Hebrews 1:1-2 it is that author's point that God's speaking during the period of the Law was through prophets who were inferior to the Son by whom He spoke the gospel. When we go to Hebrews 2:1-2, we find that it is precisely his point that the Law was spoken through angels, which makes our attention to the gospel the more necessary:

Hebrews 2:2 (NASB) For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense,

And, when we look into what Stephen proclaimed to his unwilling audience in Acts 7, we will note that he also declared that the Law did not come to Israel straight from God without intermediaries. He clearly declared that Moses received the law from "angels":

Acts 7:38 (NASB) "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

Acts 7:53 (NASB) you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Not only does the New Testament talk about angels in the giving of the Law, but it was a well-known Jewish tradition that God gave the law through the agency of angels as well as by a mediator, namely Moses. This tradition seems to be based on the Old Testament. References to the agency of angels in the giving of the law can be found in the Greek version of:

Deuteronomy 33:2 (LXX) And he said, "The LORD is come from Sinai, And has appeared from Seir to us, and has hasted out of the mount of Pharan, with the ten thousands of Cades; on his right hand were his angels with him.

Paul's argument in Galatians 3:19 is that the **superior** covenant is easily discernible in that its purpose was positive, its framework was permanent, and it was not mediated; it was confirmed by God alone. The Law, however, was negative in purpose, temporal in framework - until the seed should come, and the inferior covenant was confirmed by two parties with an intermediary (Moses the mediator).

We should observe that the Law's divine purpose is precisely opposite of that maintained by the Judaizers. They sincerely believed that the Law was the remedy for sin, rather than the revealer of sin.

Galatians 3:20 (NASB) Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.

How many of you have memorized this verse? None? Really, I'm surprised! Not really! I can't recall ever seeing this verse used as a proof of a theological position. The reason is obvious: Standing by itself, it is an enigma. But, this is also true of every other verse in the Bible -contrary to the opinion of most believers! Some verses, like Acts 2:38 and John 3:16, seem to carry a message in themselves apart from their context, but they really don't. People who think they can prove the truth of their theological notions by simply piling together isolated verses, which seem to contain an "obvious" message, are in direct violation of the first principle of hermeneutics - which is: "Scripture interprets Scripture." The whole statement of an author must be used to discover his meaning for its individual parts. And, the verse before us today stands out as a graphic illustration of the need for that principle.

The understanding of this verse is found in the preceding verses. In verse seventeen of this same chapter, Paul had already stated the divine method for a man to be declared acceptable by God. It was his declaration that the covenant of promise was the covenant by which the inheritance would become a man's possession, and that covenant was "ratified by God." His point was that it was completely God's doings to confirm the covenant of promise. Man had no part except to accept the word of promise by faith. In fact, when the covenant was confirmed, the man with whom it was confirmed was watching on the side lines (Genesis 15:12-21).

The covenant of the law was, however, both different and inferior in respect to the covenant of promise. It was different in that it was not confirmed by "one" party; rather, it was confirmed when two parties agreed to its conditions (God, who gave the conditions, and Israel, who accepted the conditions). It was inferior in that it was confirmed through the use of a mediator. A mediator is someone who helps to reconcile two opposing persons or parties to each other. The covenant of promise had been given and confirmed directly by God *alone*.

Literally, this sentence reads, "But a mediator is not one, but God is one." A contrast is being made between the plurality of participants in a process of mediation and the oneness of God. In the larger context of Paul's argument here, there is the implied contrast between the promise given directly by God to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, the seed of Abraham, and the law given through numerous intermediaries.

The law had a mediated origin. Thus the law does not provide direct access to God:

Hebrews 9:8-10 (NASB) The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing, 9 which is a symbol for

the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, 10 since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

Under the Mosaic covenant, the people did not have access into the presence of God.

Only the fulfillment of the promise in the bestowal of the Spirit to those in Christ guarantees direct access to God:

Revelation 21:1-3 (NASB) And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them,

We'll see in our study of chapter 4 of Galatians that the "Jerusalem above" is a synonym for the New Covenant.

As Paul points out in verse 20, a mediator suggests more than one party, since there is no need to mediate if there is only one person. Since God is One (which was the touchstone of orthodoxy to the Jew), His promise required no mediator, as the keeping of it was dependent only upon His faithfulness and power.

The Galatian saints could not have failed to recognize that Paul was strongly stating that the Law of Moses was inferior to the promises God had made to Abraham. The Law could only pronounce a curse, while the promises alone could produce blessing (3:1-12). The Law was inferior to the promises because it could not modify or nullify them, since the promises came first and were ratified by God Himself (3:13-18). The Law was inferior to the promises because the Law was negative and temporary, while the promises were permanent (3:19-20). Perhaps the Judaizers might protest that Paul was going too far in what he was saying for it appeared that the Law, as Paul interpreted it, was contrary to God's promises:

Galatians 3:21 (NASB) Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? 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.

Since both the law and the promise were given by God, they must be complementary rather than contradictory in the overall plan of God. The two covenants could only be contrary to each other if they were competitive. If it were possible for law, any law, to produce life, then that law would be competitive with God's promise, which can and does produce life. Since no law can impart life, there is no competition. Indeed, the Law is complimentary to the promise, for it revealed that nothing but grace can produce life.

Paul argues that if "law" could impart life, then righteousness would be by "law." And, significantly, the point of contention between Paul's "Grace Gospel" and those who teach us that we are saved through our obedience to His instruction is Paul's concept of man's deadness toward God (known as "the total depravity of man").

The problem, as Paul states it, is that men are spiritually dead before the command ever reaches them. It is fundamentally impossible for the dead to do living actions. Who has ever seen a corpse

do the actions of the living? Paul declared in Ephesians 2:1 that men who are lost are dead in trespasses and sins. Thus, they are cut off from the ability to do active actions of righteousness.

Now, those who would have us believe that the difference between the saved and the lost is the obedience of the saved (instead of the selective love and grace of God) get all bent out of shape with this claim about the negating impact of death. The deadness Paul speaks of, they claim, is not a total deadness. He simply means, they say, that we can no longer be perfect; not that we can do nothing. The problem with this argument is that it totally denies the meaning of deadness. That which is dead is without functional capacity. If I am dead, I cannot do even the most simple thing (like breathe, or blink my eyelids). If I can do those things, I am not dead.

Ephesians 2:4-5 (NASB) But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

While we were dead, God gave us life, and until He gave us life, we could not respond to any of His commands.

Theologians have developed what is called the "Ordo salutis" or the "order of salvation", which is the logical order of events in salvation. Like some other foundational doctrines, this is not spelled out in Scripture, but it can be logically deduced by looking at the whole of Scripture. Usually these events are indistinguishable in a person's life:

1. **Election:** *2 Timothy 1:9 (NASB) who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,*
2. **State of death:** *Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—*
3. **Regeneration:** *Ephesians 2:1-6 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*
4. **Effectual calling by the Word:** *Acts 13:48 (NASB) And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*

When a person hears the Word of God after he is made alive, he responds. Often the response is guilt. The weight of sin has no effect on a spiritually dead man just as physical weight has no effect on a corpse; put all the weight you want on a corpse and it will never complain.

Until a man is made alive by God, he cannot respond to the law of God. But once he is given life, the law of God teaches him of his depravity and his need of a Savior.

5. **Faith:** *Acts 16:14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.*

Faith is belief or trust in Christ and Christ alone for our salvation. Faith is the response of regeneration, not the cause of it. **Regeneration precedes faith.**

6. Salvation: Acts 16:31 *So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

This is the logical order of the events of salvation, but temporally they are often instantaneous. We cannot see the order from the standpoint of experience. Like spokes in a wheel, when one moves, they all move.

Based on the "*ordo salutis*", what is the **evidence** of regeneration? It is faith!

1 John 5:1 (NASB) Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.

The Greek text reads: "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been [perfect tense] born of God.*" Wuest translates it: "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, out from God has been born and as a result is his child.*" Law said, "*The Divine begetting is the antecedent (go before) not the consequent of the believing.*"

Let's move on in our text:

Galatians 3:22 (NASB) But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The strong adversative conjunction **but** at the beginning of this verse indicates that Paul is turning from the unreal hypothesis of a positive role for the law to the reality of the negative role of the law. The law has the negative function of condemning everyone. Literally, Paul says, "The Scripture imprisoned all under sin." Probably, Paul has in mind Deuteronomy 27:26, the specific Scripture he quoted in verse 10: "*Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.*" This citation from the law summarizes the purpose of the law: To demonstrate that all are sinners and to put all sinners under God's judgment. Paul's emphasis on the universality of human sin (v. 22) and the universality of God's judgment on all sinners (v. 10) reduces Jews to the same status as Gentiles - *the whole world is a prisoner of sin*. So identification with the Jewish people by circumcision and observance of the Mosaic law does not remove one from the circle of "Gentile sinners."

The word translated "shut up" is the Greek word *sugkleio*. It is only used 4 times in the New Testament.

Romans 11:32 (NASB) For God has shut up [sugkleio] all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.

Luke used it to describe the condition of fish caught in a net:

Luke 5:6 (NASB) And when they had done this, they enclosed [sugkleio] a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break;

Simon Peter's nets were so full, the fish were so cramped in the nets, that the nets began to break. That is a great picture of the bind we find ourselves in under the law. We are enclosed, encircled, pressed down upon, and bound up on all sides by the law as it convicts us of our sin.

The essential meaning of sugkleio is: "to be restricted from freedom of movement." Thus, to be shut up under law meant to be caught by the law in such a manner that one could not escape. One who is "under sin" can only sin. This is why it is foolish to tell someone who is "under sin" to do righteousness. He cannot. Paul says in this verse that the Scriptures have shut up all men under sin. He means that the Scriptures declare that man is incapable of doing what is right, because he is in the fishnet of sin - being completely dominated by sin in his actions and motives.

"...that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." Now we can see how the law and the promise work in harmony to fulfill the purpose of God. The law puts us down under the curse; the promise lifts us up in Christ. We are left with no exit under the condemnation of the law so that we might find our freedom only by faith in Christ.

Christians must learn to distinguish between what is part of a bygone era and that which is binding on saints today. There is a dire need for Christians to recognize that everything that is "biblical" is not always applicable to our day. To be specific, the Law of Moses is biblical in that it is found in the Bible. This was, no doubt, one of the principle arguments of the Judaizers when seeking to convince the Gentiles of their need to be under the Law. Paul corrected this error by showing the preferability of grace over Law (3:1-12), the priority of the Abrahamic Covenant over the Mosaic (3:15-18), and the permanence of grace over the provisional nature of law (3:19ff.).

The Christian Reconstruction movement, whose proponents are Rushdoony, Bahnsen, and Gary North, answers Paul's question, "Why the Law then?" (v. 19) this way: God gave the Mosaic Law to provide a framework for the operation of every nation's government (See Gary DeMar, *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction*).

"Reconstructionists anticipate a day when Christians will govern using the Old Testament as the law book" (Rodney Clapp, "Democracy as Heresy," *Christianity Today* February 20, 1987, p. 17.) They miss the whole idea that the law is negative and temporary. In an unsaved person, all the law does is to increase transgression.

This message preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on February 13, 2005. [Tape #312b](#).

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