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Series: Special Messages
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The Law and The Promise

Twice in Chapter 2 (verses 5 and 14), the Apostle Paul underscores “the truth of the gospel.” This so gripped him that he would not yield at any point—he would even rebuke a fellow apostle who was not walking “according to the truth of the gospel.” Paul would not sacrifice this important point even for the sake of what is falsely referred to as “Christian love.” While we are called to speak the truth *in love* (Ephesians 4:15), only love *in the truth* is God’s love. Much of what passes for “Christian love” is nothing more than sentimentalism that operates at only a superficial level. The Judaizers came preaching *another* gospel, one that put a premium on circumcision and the Law as the means of salvation. This Paul emphatically and categorically repudiated. If one is not justified by the Law, then what purpose did it serve? Reformed theology, following John Calvin,¹ speaks of three functions of the law. First and foremost, it reveals, as a mirror, our sin and its curse. This is called the *theological* use of the law and is what Paul has in mind in Galatians 3:24. In the second place, the Law serves to protect the society from the unjust. This is called the *civil* use of the Law. It serves as a deterrent to lawlessness. A society cannot survive that does not have law. Finally, the Law as its *principal use*² admonishes and exhorts moral behavior. This is the *moral* use of the Law. “The law was first given,” writes Michael Horton, “as a realistic expectation for human behavior because God created Adam and Eve with moral excellence. After the Fall, of course, human beings are incapable of conforming to this law. Even if they have not physically abused another person, they have murdered through gossip or slander. Even if they have not stolen from their neighbor by slipping into his home at night, they have not done everything they could do to protect their neighbor’s possessions. Even Christians cannot conform perfectly to this law, and they ought never to approach the law as though they could even come close to its moral excellence. Rather, believers ought to approach the law as the perfect standard God requires as the expression of His moral character and live, not in order to *meet* God’s requirements (for that is achieved only in Christ), but in order simply to *obey* God’s requirements. In the former approach, one sets out to *earn* God’s favor by *attaining* his own righteousness; in the latter, one sets out to obey a gracious heavenly Father simply because He has *already accepted* him or her as righteous and holy.”³ The Law and its functions now become the focus of Paul’s attention. He will seek to show that the Christian gospel is directly connected with the promises made to Abraham. The gospel is grounded in *promise* not in the Law. We must not, however, think that this means that there is a fundamental conflict in the Word of God. God is not the author of confusion. The Law is from God and so are the Promises—but the two operate in different and complementary spheres. To understand them is to understand what Paul means by “the truth of the gospel.”

I. THE VALIDITY OF THE PROMISE

You will remember that in the third chapter of Galatians, Paul is establishing his gospel with an argumentative strategy that has three stages. 3:1-5 forms the first stage, the argument from experience. 3:6 - 14 is the argument drawn from Scripture (Genesis 15:6). The final stage, 3:15 - 18, is the argument known as *exempla*. This is taken from the field of law in which some past action, real or assumed, may persuade the audience of the truth of the point which is under discussion.⁴

A. The Promises Made to Abraham (verses 15, 16)

God made *unconditional* promises to the patriarch many years before Moses and the Law. Abraham was promised “a seed” (posterity), “a land” and “a great name.” Paul develops his argument by appealing to the well-known examples of contracts or wills (in verse 15, he uses the word DIATHÈKE, covenant). His point is simple—even among men we all recognize that once contracts are drawn up they cannot be modified—since this is true on the human level, then surely the covenant God made with Abraham (which was unilateral and entirely unconditional) is likewise unchangeable.

B. The Promises Fulfilled in Christ

“Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ.”⁵ This point is underscored by the Apostle in his appealing to the singular use of the word seed (called a collective singular, cf. Genesis 4:25; 21:13; I Samuel 1:11; II Samuel 7:12).

C. The Later Addition: The Law of Moses (verses 17, 18)

The Abrahamic covenant based on promise was never annulled. The inheritance, therefore, is not on the basis of law but on the promise and therefore on faith—given (the Greek word is CHARIZOMAI, literally “to give graciously”) to Abraham by God.

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

If the law must *add* something to the promise in order to bring it to fulfillment, then the promise as the unconditional grant of God’s salvation loses its gracious character—and the Law was never intended to supplement the promise.

A. The Question (verse 19)
Why then the Law? What is its significance? (The same issue is addressed by Paul in Romans 5:20 - 21.)

B. The Answer (verses 19, 20)

The Law was *added* (brought in alongside of) the promise. Why? —“because of transgressions.” This translation (both NIV and ESV) is incorrect. The Greek word CHARIN may be causal or purposive (Romans 4:15 shows that it cannot be causal). It has a purposive sense “for the sake of transgressions”—i.e. to show sin’s true character. John Colquhoun put it best, “We were ‘*born in iniquity and conceived in sin*’ (Psalm 51:5). We came in to the world entirely destitute of the moral image of God, and wholly under the dominion of natural depravity (Job 11:12). The holy law commands us to love God supremely, but by nature we love ourselves supremely. It enjoins us to love our neighbor as ourselves; but we, on the contrary, hate our neighbor, especially in relation to the momentous concerns of his immortal soul. The law requires us to delight supremely in the Lord our God; but instead of this we delight only in sin, or at least in that which is not God. We are commanded in the law to do all to the glory of God, but we are naturally disposed to do all to our own glory. These corrupt propensities are native in the heart of every descendant of Adam, and are directly contrary to the holy nature and law of God (Psalm 53:1 – 3). So great is the contrariety between the holy nature of God as expressed in His law and the nature of a sinner, that God is said to hate sinners (Psalm 5:5), and sinners to hate Him (Romans 8:7). And no man has attained a true conviction of his sin but he whom the Holy Spirit has made to see and feel that by nature he is a hater of God and of the whole revealed character of God.”⁶

III. THE HARMONY BETWEEN LAW AND PROMISE

Is there a conflict between the two? *Far be it!* is Paul’s declaration. The Law serves as a judge upon man. It does not provide pardon and only condemns (and rightly so). The Law reveals sin (cf. I Corinthians 15:56). It *only* serves to demonstrate that fallen man cannot be justified by his own efforts i.e. works, covenantal faithfulness, even obedience (something the Judaizers were urging on the Galatians).

CONCLUSION: The Law and the Promise are not two ways of salvation. The Law cannot *give* life. Only Christ, who is the Promise, can do that. He is the absolute guarantee of God’s faithfulness. All the emphasis falls on Christ. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look away from yourself and look to the Lamb of God (John 2:29). Calvin wisely wrote, “We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is ‘of him.’ If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects that he might learn to feel our pain. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; . . . if inheritance of the heavenly kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book II, Chapter VII, sec. 1 - 17.

² Ibid. p. 360. The third use of the law, which Calvin says, pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, is often sadly neglected in Evangelical circles.

³ M.S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom: Relating to God and Others Through the Ten Commandments* (Moody Press, 1993), p. 32.

⁴ cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: Hermenia A Critical and Historical Commentary* (Fortress, 1979), p. 154.

⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Moody, 1987), p. 84.

⁶ J. Colquhoun, *A Treatise On The Law and The Gospel* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), p. 95.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, 2.16.19.