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Preacher: Raymond & Pat Dague

[0:00] So, today our message will be taken sort of from the second reading, that's Galatians 3.21-4.7.

So you might find your pew Bible and find the book of Galatians. Although, I'm not really going to use this in isolation. I really want to talk about the entire epistle to the Galatians, or really the theme that it's really getting at.

So in order to do that, we need to back up and think about what the Apostle Paul is doing in writing to this particular church here.

This letter of Paul to the churches in this area of Turkey was sent because of a particular problem. And that's true for most of the letters of the New Testament.

In order to understand what we're talking about, what they're writing about, we need to understand why the letter was written. What problem or issue is it being addressed to?

[1:07] The church in this region was a solid Christian church. They had not fallen into apostasy. They'd not fallen away from the Lord.

But they were slipping into some error, if you will. They felt that any real follower of Jesus would be somebody who keeps the law set forth in the Old Testament.

They knew that Jesus was a Jew. And he was an observant Jew. And that they reasoned that a good disciple of Jesus would keep the law like he kept the law.

So we might surmise that the Christians in this church were, many of them, Jews. And they were very comfortable with their Jewish law. Maybe even this church came out of one of the synagogues in that area.

And as non-Jews converted and joined them and became part of them, they said to them, you know, you really need to follow the law in order to be fully what Jesus wants you to be, what God wants you to be.

[2:13] So let's look at that for a minute and think about it. Now, law. You might ask, what law? What are we talking about? When we see the word law in our Bibles, either in the Old Testament or the New Testament, it does not refer to what we in the 20th century Western world call the law.

Or at least it doesn't directly refer to it. In my law office, right next door here, we once had copies of the New York statutes. There were huge black books. I don't know how many shelf feet that it took up.

An awful lot. And they're all online now, but it's the same thing. It's all a written law. All right? And there's also federal statutes called the United States Code, federal law.

And there's a body of statutes, ordinances, they call them, for the city of Syracuse. And the county has ordinances, and this church building of ours sits in the town of Onondaga, and we're governed or we're subject to town of Onondaga town ordinances.

For example, when it snows outside, it's not uncommon for the church and for me to get a rather polite but direct letter from the town of Onondaga codes officer telling us that we are in violation because we haven't cleared our snow fast enough off the driveway or off the sidewalks in front of the building.

[3:51] And if we don't do that, in theory, they could follow it up with a summons and drag us into court and give us some kind of a fine. We've gotten a few of those letters over the last couple of years.

Jim Fuller usually grabs the church one. Elaine and I see the one that comes into the office. Law makes certain things to be crimes. It deals with the regulation of food and drugs.

It sets up zoning uses for property. It allocates money to run the government. It sets rules of the road for how we're supposed to drive. It regulates how you can put chemicals into the environment

or not.

And it does a thousand other things that we all know as law. There's also judge-made law because in common law countries, law is not just the statutes that are written out, but the interpretations of the statutes by the courts.

And law is a good thing because without it, the society would be a society of total anarchy, with the strong oppressing the weak and everyone doing whatever they wanted without regard to anyone else or the rest of society.

[5 : 03] Now, the region of Galatia, where this letter was written to these people, they also had laws just kind of like we do. They were part of the Roman Empire, and Roman law dealt differently with things than our modern law, but it was basically the same kind of thing.

In fact, our modern law is rooted in good part upon Roman law. The common law of England that we got came out of Roman law. The law told them what to do, and it prescribed penalties if you don't do these things.

But this is not what Paul is talking about when he uses the word law in this letter, the letter to the Galatians, or any of the other epistles of the New Testament.

Paul is referring to one specific thing when he says law. When he says law, he's referring only to the first five books of the Old Testament, which in Hebrew has the word Torah associated with them.

Torah and law. It's also called the books of Moses, since Moses may have written them, or may have written some of them. Or these five books may have originated from what Moses taught to the people and have been compiled by others.

[6 : 26] Or perhaps they're called that because the second through fifth book are about Israel in the time of Moses. But in any case, within these books are all sorts of rules, laws, instructions, whatever you want to call it, things that God told the people through Moses that were written down.

We all know the Ten Commandments are included in those books. It's in Exodus, and it's repeated again in the book of Deuteronomy, the second book and the fifth book. But there are hundreds of other rules and laws which God gave to Moses to tell the people.

Next Sunday is New Year's... No, this next Tuesday is New Year's Day. And according to the Jewish way of counting, that was eight days after Jesus was born on Christmas Day.

Now, you and I will look at it and we'll say, wait a minute, it's seven days. But they counted the day, they counted both the starting day and the ending day. We tend not to do that. We tend to start with the next day.

So they counted that as eight days afterwards. And the Torah, the law said that a newborn boy was to be circumcised when he was eight days old as a sign between the covenant between God and his people.

[7 : 51] And the New Testament, in fact, the Gospels record that Jesus was, in fact, circumcised when he was eight days old, just as the Torah said should be done.

This is just one of hundreds of rules in the Torah which say what God's chosen people should obey. They were to refrain from eating pork and other dietary laws.

They were not to work on the Sabbath. Slave women captured in battle had to be treated in a certain far more humane way than you might surmise was common in that era.

Feasts such as Passover were to be celebrated. Their clothing had to be made of only one kind of fabric. It couldn't mix cotton and wool together. It could be cotton or it could be wool, but it couldn't be mixed.

And there were a lot of other such laws. So when Paul here in Galatians talks about the law, he is referring to this Jewish Torah.

[8 : 52] So in Galatians, now I'm going to back up, not the part that we read this morning, to chapter 2, verses 15 through 16.

He writes this, We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. Because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

So if it's clear from what Paul says that our relationship with God is through faith in Jesus, does that mean we can completely dispense with the law?

Or put another way, in what sense is the law of the Old Testament, the Torah, binding upon Christians, if at all? Those are the principal questions which the Galatian Christians were dealing with in this letter, or that Paul was dealing with in writing to them.

[10:05] So let's pick up with Galatians 3.21, the beginning of our reading today, as Paul continues to discuss this issue. He writes like this, Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?

Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture imprisoned everything under sin so that the promise of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

You know, I don't know about you guys, but I remember when I was a little boy, they would read in my church the epistles, and they would read the gospels. I always understood the gospels. Their accounts, their stories. The epistles just kind of blew a little over my head. I had a, I mean, I understood the words. I was smart enough to understand the words, but to get the flow of it was a little trickier.

And so, it's not easy to understand quite what he said, but let's sort of unpack it a little bit. I think there are two thoughts that we can extract from this scripture.

[11:16] The first one is right at the beginning of verse 21 where Paul writes, Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not, he writes.

The first thought is this. It is perhaps understandable to think that if salvation comes through faith in Jesus, then we can dispense with the law and say that it is not compatible with Jesus' gospel.

But Paul clearly says that such is not the case. In that verse, 321, Paul explicitly declares that the law is not contrary to faith in Jesus.

So despite that Paul says in Galatians 2.16, the one that I read a few minutes ago, that, quote, a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, end quote, he does not go so far as to say that we can throw away the law as inconsistent with faith in Jesus.

In fact, he explicitly says in 321 that there is no inconsistency between the law and faith in Jesus.

Then he goes on after that, the end of 321 through 22, and he writes this, For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

[12:49] But Scripture imprisoned everything under sin so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now, that is a clear statement that the law of itself, while it serves a role in the life of faith in Jesus, is not sufficient for it.

Law requires something more. It's sort of a pointer, if you will, beyond itself. Look at that odd phrase, Scripture imprisoned everything under sin.

What on earth is that supposed to mean? What's he getting at? Well, that's one way to say that without the law defining what sin is.

Without there being a law so that we realize that when we don't do it, it's sin, we would never get to the place where we would come to Jesus and confess sin.

[13:50] If you don't know what sin is, you don't need confession of sin. I remember a long, long time ago, I had a girlfriend. This was when I was in law school, long before I met Pat.

And she was a very, very good person. And she was a really, really good person and had absolutely no sense that she sinned. And it was exceedingly difficult, really impossible for me to talk with her about the gospel and the need to come to forgiveness because she was really such a good person.

If you don't have a sense of there being a standard and you're deviating from the standard, you don't really need Jesus. And Jesus said that many, many times to these Pharisees who thought they were really so very good.

That's part of the reason why my relationship with that particular girlfriend didn't work out. Put another way, the role of the law is to define a standard for what God wants of us.

When we fall short of that standard, it's God's grace through Jesus which gives us salvation. So, alright, let's keep reading on.

[15:14] Paul goes on to elaborate and explain this in 3.23-24. Now, before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. Once again, this is not easy stuff.

What are these words, held captive, imprisoned, guardian? They sort of stick out here a little bit. What on earth does that mean, these somewhat harsh characterizations?

And apparently what he is doing is, he means that the requirement to follow the law had a definite role in leading us to faith in Jesus as the way to salvation.

But that said, once we've seen Jesus, the law doesn't necessarily disappear, but it becomes very different. It does not and cannot save us.

[16 : 25] So the Jews of Galatia, who were saying that a Christian must obey the law, or you're not saved, you've got to circumcise your little boy when he's eight days old, they were missing what Jesus wanted for them.

They were thinking to themselves, this was part of the salvation message of God. Jesus is saying, that's not so. We won't read the rest of this part in Galatians line by line.

You don't want a sermon long enough for me to go in as much detail as I have on the first few verses here. But I want you to just scan it just now if you can, and I want you to notice that there's something, not that it says, but that it does not say.

Kind of an odd thing for me to ask you to do. He does not say that we can ignore the law now that Jesus has come and we have our faith in him.

He talks about the law, he talks about it in a different way, but we don't just chuck it in the waste basket. Instead, he goes to talk about the role of the law.

[17 : 39] He talks about the law being to us like sort of the role of a guardian for a young king before he reaches the age when the king can take full authority. But he does not say that the law has no role at all now that Jesus offers salvation by faith.

Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that there is no role for the law. Now, there are parts of the law which are specifically superseded by Jesus' sacrifice for sin.

For example, no Christian would ever offer a sacrifice of a sheep or a turtle dove for their sin as they were told to do in the Torah. Jesus, as the one perfect sacrifice once for all, took care of that. And the early church decided that some of the law would not be forced on Gentiles who accepted Jesus, such as circumcision. Apparently, this Galatian church didn't hear about the decision made in Acts when the elders in Jerusalem decided that that wasn't to be imposed on the Gentile Christians.

But the moral rules and the dietary rules they didn't say that you couldn't eat pork. But the moral rules of the New Testament church still pretty much look like what the moral rules are that are found in the Torah.

[19 : 09] I'll give you one real interesting example. Honoring your father and your mother, the fifth commandment. It's in the law, it's in the Ten Commandments. That's the right thing to do today just as it was in Moses' era.

In fact, you'll remember that Jesus explicitly criticized the Pharisees for ignoring that particular commandment. We won't turn to it, but if you go back and you look at Mark chapter 7 verse 8, Jesus said to the Pharisees, you leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. He was criticizing them for ignoring that commandment. And also, not killing, not committing adultery, and other things are still enjoined upon the Christian as things that we should obey in the law.

So how is it different now? Well, for the ancient Jews following the law, the Torah, the law, was the way to God.

That's not true for us. For one, we will fail to follow the moral law perfectly, just as the Jews of Moses' day and Jesus' day and our day, we all fail.

[20 : 28] And that is why we need faith in Christ, because we will fail. But this does not mean that we just chuck the law and ask Jesus for forgiveness and keep right on doing anything that we want.

God, there are some who accused the early Christians of this, and once again, I won't turn to it, but if you look at what Paul wrote in Romans chapter 6 and chapter 7, he clearly refutes that argument. Well, if this is so, why is obeying the rules and the law important in following if it won't lead us to salvation? Why should we do it? Well, there are several reasons, but I'm going to focus here on three that I have identified.

Number one, following the law gives order to our lives. Imagine a nation with absolutely no laws whatsoever.

A nation without laws would be a nation, a country of total anarchy. I think of Venezuela these days when I think of that. an individual who will not obey any laws or any rules in the same manner is a person whose internal and external life is complete chaos.

[21 : 50] If you don't follow some sort of pattern or standard of behavior in your life, you are ruled by emotion, whim, or, as is very much the case these days, the societal winds which happen to be blowing whatever direction is popular at the moment.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, 26-40 talks about order in the church. This is the part where he's talking about how the Corinthian church was a little disorganized and how he didn't want them all speaking in tongues at the same time.

At the end of the chapter, in 1 Corinthians 14, 40, he summarizes this principle when he says, all things should be done decently and in order.

This is as true of a nation as it is of a church as it is of an individual. So the first reason to follow the law is that it helps put some sort of an order in our lives which we would lack if we just did everything according to whatever.

Second reason to follow the law. Following the law is God's pattern for human life. We can't please God enough for salvation by following his moral rules, but we can work a process of drawing closer to him by following the law that he wants us to follow.

[23 : 24] Salvation is a matter of following Jesus. But sanctification is a lifelong process of following the right way in life that God lays out.

Sure, we'll fail, and that's where forgiveness through Jesus comes in. But if we're not even trying to follow God's rules for a moral life, at some point, isn't it appropriate to kind of say, gee, have we really committed to Jesus as our Lord and Savior?

the man who says he's Jesus' disciple but shows absolutely no fruit in his life is someone that we kind of might wonder a little about. It's God's call, not ours, but the point still stands.

So the second reason to follow the law is that it's a pattern designed by God for how we run our lives. following the law makes us a lot happier.

Many of you know that it's become apparent from recent events that I deal with mental illness in my law practice. I deal with people who are severely mentally ill and help them through their criminal and other problems having to do with the system.

[24 : 54] We recently had an incident involving one such individual that I won't get into. And one thing I have noticed, I've done this really since the beginning of my law practice, which now goes back close to 40 years, I hate to say, is that mentally ill people who are out of control and follow none of the norms of our society and culture are profoundly unhappy.

They don't enjoy doing what they do. They may act out a lot, they may or may not be able to stop doing what they're doing, but they don't really feel very good about it.

They are very tortured. Now that's not to suggest that following moral rules will cure mental illness, it absolutely will not. But insofar as someone who struggles with mental illness is able to conform themselves to some sort of things like about what Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount, that person will be happier and better off.

Now that observation that I made about people who are mentally ill, that applies just as much to somebody who isn't. do wrong things and you'll feel worse.

Do right things and you'll feel better. Following God's law is no cure for all of our ills. It will not save us, but it will make us feel better than just randomly running to and fro and doing whatever we feel like.

[26 : 36] That might be some sort of fun in some funny way in the short run. But the discipline of following what God wants will in the long run and even in the medium run give us far more peace than just doing whatever feels good at the moment.

Now, I've given three reasons why we should follow the law as Christians. It's important not to overemphasize this. Being a good legalist, following the rules just so well, can be a great source of pride.

I do it so much better than the next guy in the pew. The Pharisees were great legalists. Jesus didn't have a lot of good to say about that.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, makes it clear that following the law is not what Jesus wants for our salvation. But Jesus wants far more out of us than just to be saved.

And then go on living our lives like the whole rest of the world, ignoring the laws which God gave us to follow. So, to sort of finish, what do we make of following the rules, obeying the law, or whatever else we want to call it?

[28:05] we should understand that doing good will not save us. If there is anything in the gospel, if there's any message in the whole of the New Testament, it's that only our faith in Jesus can save us.

But the Christian life doesn't stop after you've accepted Jesus. It goes on. If our Christian story ends with the day we became a Christian and how we committed ourselves to Jesus, it would be a pretty shallow and sad story.

Think of it this way. This is a little metaphor that I gave to someone who was in the process of coming to Christ and did come to Christ and was ultimately baptized here.

Becoming a Christian and living a Christian life is a bit like joining the Navy and becoming a good sailor or an army and becoming a good soldier. A man or a woman who joins the Navy by going down to the recruiting office, having the basic qualifications and taking the oath and you're in.

You're in the Navy. But that doesn't make you a good sailor and end the story, does it? Absolutely not. You have to proceed in your military service.

[29:21] You have to train and you have to perform for your country. It's every bit the same with joining the kingdom of God by being inducted in through Jesus.

That's the necessary first step, but it does not end there. It really begins there. Jesus saves us, but then we start a lifelong journey of sanctification, a fancy word that the theologians use.

So, if you want to hear a little bit more about this, the next sermon in this series is only two days away. as we gather in this place for morning prayer on New Year's Day at 10 in the morning.

Come and join us and hear more about the rule of following the law for a Christian and how we can best do it. But for the moment, let's pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30:24] Amen. Amen.