

The Purpose of the Law

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you remember back in primary school, having to learn the times tables. One times two is? Two times two is?

Three times two is? I bet your hands up, which of you thought that the seven times table was the hardest? No? Yeah. Six times seven, seven times seven, eight times seven.

It's all easy now, right? But back then, that was probably the hardest to get the hang of. I know some of you are really smart, so you would have probably moved on to the 11 to 19 times tables in no time.

Not me. I think I tried 11 and 12, and that was about it. Well, it was a big effort for a young kid, but you eventually nailed it, only to find that when you got to high school, there was such a thing as a calculator.

And that's when you go, what? The teacher made me learn all that when he could have just given me the calculator. What's going on?

[1 : 05] It wasn't just maths, of course. What about learning to write? All those hours practicing neat handwriting, learning to do cursive writing so that you could earn your pen license, only to discover one day this thing called Microsoft Word.

Or if you're a bit older, the typewriter. And you think, what was the purpose of all that handwriting practice? And of course, nowadays, with spell check and autocorrect, why do we even have spelling tests in the first place?

Well, in the weeks we've been studying Galatians, what Paul's been drumming into us and the Galatians is that justification, that is, being made right with God, is by faith alone and not by the law. If you look at chapter 2, verse 15 and 16, that was spelt out clearly in those verses. Last week, Daniel walked us through chapter 3, where Paul expanded on how the law was never meant to justify.

Paul pointed to the Galatians' experience, to Scripture itself, and then to reason or common sense to prove his point. And so today we come to a little digression from this main argument.

[2 : 20] As Paul meets the objection he thinks some of them will have, which is to say, if justification, being made right with God, was by faith all along, then why was the law needed in the first place?

Why did the Jews have to put themselves through the equivalent of learning the times tables, or spelling tests, when they could have gone automatically straight to justification by faith?

Why did God make them go through years and years of observing the law? Well, because as Paul explains now, there is actually a purpose for the law.

And in particular, the law served a purpose historically for Israel. So look back a few verses in verse 16, and Paul tells us, the promises were first given to Abraham before the law was introduced.

But in verse 17, the law is then introduced some 430 years later, still introduced. And when it was, it didn't set aside God's covenant, nor the promises given to Abraham.

[3 : 27] All of these were to be appropriated by faith. So now in verse 19, Paul leads off with the question, why then was the law given at all?

Why was it introduced after the promise, when the promise still stood? And when justification was still by faith, as Paul says of Abraham in verse 6 of chapter 3.

So also Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Faith coming through righteousness, righteousness coming through faith. Well, in my outline, you'll see that I've given, that Paul gives us three reasons.

And we're going to just work through that tonight. So first, the law was given to Israel in order to show them that they were sinful, verses 19 and 20. It was added, Paul says, because of

transgressions, until the seed to whom the promise referred had come.

The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. A mediator, however, implies more than one party, but God is one. Now first, Paul uses the word transgressions, which means to overstep a mark.

[4 : 39] You see, sin was already in the world from the time Adam fell for Satan's temptation. But the law was given so that when they sinned, God's people knew they had overstepped God's mark.

Because now there was a clear standard against which they've transgressed. It's just like the sign at my local swimming pool. Everyone knows that spitting on the bathroom floor is wrong.

I hope you know that. Even a three-year-old knows that, I think, because they always scrunch their face in disgust when they see anyone doing that, without anyone having to say that to them. And yet, management has still put up the sign about this rule.

So that now, if anyone did spit, it's clear that they've transgressed the rule on the sign. No one can claim anymore that they didn't know.

And so it is with the law. What it does is to externalize or make clear what's already in the inner moral conscience of every human. And so for Israel, the law now meant they knew what God required of them.

[5 : 50] And yet, even though they knew, they still failed to live up to it. Now for the second half of what I've just read, that's confused many people. What is all this talk about a mediator?

Well, just putting aside the issue of the angels there, which I think is Paul's way of describing how the law was transmitted from God through messengers, the mediator here is clearly Moses.

It was to him that God entrusted the law, which he then gave to the people. And Paul says in general that where there is a mediator, there's usually more than one party to the arrangement.

So here, one party is God, the giver of the law, but the other should have been Israel, the one who would fulfill the law. But Paul is suggesting here that it's actually slightly different with the law, because although God has given the law, Israel was unable to keep their end of the contract.

And so that leads to the second purpose of the law, which is that the law helped draw Israel's attention back to the promises of God. It helped them to realize that they couldn't fulfill the law, and they needed God to provide the seed to come to provide for their justification.

[7 : 06] So this is now spelt out if you look down at verse 21 in the next two verses. 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. But scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

You see, it might seem like the law was now this other way to get to God, which would bypass the promises. That's what I think Paul means by, is the law being opposed to God's promises.

But his answer is absolutely not. Or in the Greek, meganoito. Why not? Because if it's possible for a human to obey the law, then righteousness and consequently life with God would certainly have come by the law, come through the law.

But because of sin, this was now humanly impossible. No one could escape from the control of sin. And so God gives the law so that everyone in Israel could see this, that this was just a dead end.

[8 : 20] Moreover, if you knew what was in the law, you'd also realize that God didn't just lay down the requirements in it. He actually also provided what would happen when Israel failed.

Because God also provided the sacrifices and the sacrificial system by which a repentant and contrite Israel could make right with God after their failure.

So the entire book of Leviticus is dedicated to this. And in chapter 16, there's even a day called the Day of Atonement, a whole day set aside by God, each year where the high priest is able to come through animal sacrifices to atone or make right for all the sins of the people.

And so God is actually the one party on both sides of the law. He lays down its requirements, and then he also provides for the people to be able to maintain a relationship with him through it.

Now in the Old Testament, the provision for this is with animal sacrifices. But in the New, Jesus becomes the ultimate sacrifice so that what God promised Abraham might now be given, verse 22, through faith in Jesus Christ and to those who believe.

[9 : 44] And so this seeming alternative to God's promise, that is the law, merely drives back, people back, to the need for God's promises.

And in particular, it points the way to Jesus as the only way of salvation. Trying to obey the law, just like any other human way, relies on human effort and goodness, which cannot succeed because of sin.

You know, naive teenager that I was, I once thought I could achieve sinless perfection. Yeah, don't laugh.

I thought that if I spent enough time in meditation, released all that negative energy or stress from me, if I mentally talked myself through all the good things that I would do, and then psyched myself out and left my bedroom, then I would be able to be that better person, that perfect person. One day maybe get to that perfect state of sinlessness. And it all sounded achievable in theory until I did step out of my room.

[11:00] And the first thing I heard was my mom telling me to tidy my room and to wash the dishes, which I had left overnight. And in a flash, all that meditation and mental preparation flew out the window.

It's impossible, isn't it? And I know that most of you are smart enough to realize, not to even try. Which means we can't earn the right to internal life through obeying any laws, can we? And if we're honest enough about this predicament, it's actually rather despairing, isn't it? But the good thing is, what it does is drive us back to God's promises, drives us back to faith in Jesus, God's promise seed.

Now, Paul, in verses 23 and 24, then gives a third purpose of the law, and that is to be a guardian for Israel until the coming of Christ.

Here, between the time of Moses and Jesus, what the law did was to keep Israel within the protection of the covenant. Israel couldn't fulfill the law because of sin, we know that already.

[12:15] But hearing and keeping the law helped them not to stray from God or His promises. It was a safeguarding measure. So Paul now says that before the coming of this faith, which more precisely means before the coming of Jesus, the object of this faith, we, the Jews, were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.

So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Now the phrase locked up seems rather negative, and taken in one way that is, sin has locked them up in prison, and the law was, as it were, the prison guard. But there's also the image of a guardian further down in the passage, someone assigned to protect a child or keep them safe.

And this is the positive and protective role of the law for Israel. We'll see more of that in the next week. But if you think about being locked up, it can actually be a good thing if the alternative is that you are sent to the gallows for execution.

And for Israel, they were indeed on death row. The wages of sin is death. And when you're on death row, the only way to be freed is to be pardoned.

[13:38] And so there Israel was locked up until the divine pardon came through Jesus because he takes the penalty for their sin.

But in the meantime, what the law did was keep Israel protected from ultimate judgment and within the boundary of God's promises. As they meditated on the law, it reminded them of God's promises. As they followed the sacrificial system, it kept them in relationship or covenant with God. And if you read the Old Testament, there were actually times in their history where they actually came close to fulfilling all that because they forgot the law.

They forgot to pass it on from one generation to the next. So it happened during King Josiah's time in 2 Kings chapter 22. Hilkiyah, the high priest, he stumbles upon a copy of the law in the temple.

I mean, imagine that. You're the priest and you don't have the law. But when he actually found it, he had it read. And if you read verse 11, when the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his robes.

[14:49] He gave these orders to Hilkiyah. Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book.

They have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us. Likewise, after the exile from Babylon, the returnees had to be reacquainted with the law.

And so if you read Nehemiah, Ezra, the scribe, reads the law to the assembly from daybreak to noon continuously for 24 days. That's nearly two weeks.

Or is that more than two weeks? No, that's three weeks. No, that's more than three weeks. Okay, 24 days. Nearly a month. That's a lot, isn't it? It's now to the end of October. And you can read their response in Nehemiah chapter 8.

I can tell you my time stable was better, wasn't it? And how they responded was both with joy and weeping, feasting and fasting, repentance and praise.

[15:59] And that's how it is whenever God's people hear His law. They realize the grip of sin on them and weep. But then they're also drawn to God's promises and deliverance.

And so in this way, the law guards the hearts of those in Israel until the coming of faith. And this is where Paul now turns in verses 26 to 29.

The good news of Jesus coming to free Israel from this imprisonment and where the law is no longer their guardian. But it's also good news for the Gentiles because they are no longer thereby excluded from the promise just because they didn't have the law.

Instead, and these are the key words of the passage, I think, and great words of assurance, verse 26, So in Christ Jesus you are all children or sons of God through faith.

For all of you who are baptized into Christ have closed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

[17:10] If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. where once the boundary line was the law and whether you were under it or not, that is Jew versus Gentile, now the new boundary is Christ.

To belong to Christ now depends not on whether you are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, it only requires faith in Jesus. Now Paul isn't saying here that these three social markers are the only important distinctions that are dissolved.

Rather, he brings these three up because of the context of the latter. Jew and Gentile, we've already seen, was the distinction between being under the law or not. But slave and free is mentioned because that's the distinction that's used when it comes to inheritance.

Only those born to the free could be heirs. Hence, in a couple of weeks, Paul will go on to talk about Isaac and Ishmael, one born to the free woman and therefore inheriting Abraham's promise and the other denied because he's a son of a slave woman.

But this distinction no longer applies when you are in Christ. Both the slave and the free in the world are free in Christ and heirs of Abraham's promise.

[18:34] As for male and female, Paul raises this distinction because he's just spoken about children of God. The better translation is actually sons of God because traditionally, females were not counted as seed or heirs to the family inheritance.

But again, this is no longer the case in Christ. In Christ, both male and female become sons of God. We're all sons of God even as Christ himself is the son of God.

Anything that Christ enjoys as the son, we inherit and share in too, male or female, as sons of God. So that's the wonderful truth of what it means to be in Christ.

Paul here speaks of being baptized into Christ or being clothed with Christ. It's all a picture of union, of being incorporated with him.

Paul is simply making a profound point here that all now belong to Christ by faith, regardless of any social marker. Faith in Christ is the only boundary separating those who are in Christ from those who aren't.

[19:49] And in the next few weeks, as we look further on in Galatians, we'll see the wonderful implications of this. But for tonight, I just want to conclude by considering then, what is the purpose of the law then for us?

If it's fulfilled its purpose for the Jews and it's no longer needed for Christians to belong to Christ, then how should we be relating to the law?

How do we read the Old Testament? Is the Ten Commandments, for instance, still relevant for us? And throughout church history, there have been Christians who have argued based on this fact that the Old Testament is no longer relevant and therefore can be tossed out as a result if we're Christians.

But I want to argue that that's actually not right because as we saw in Psalm 19 today, even though the law cannot give life, the law is still perfect and right and pure.

Jesus' coming doesn't change any of that because God's law always reflected God's unchanging and perfect character. And so point one, because God's law is still His perfect revelation, it's still

able to show us who God is and what He's like.

[21 : 04] That's why the New Testament writers, for example, continue to look to it for its authority, for their authority. That's why Paul here still quotes so much from it in his letter.

And so just as it did for Israel, the more we meditate on the law, the more we'll know God and His character. And also, the more we'll discover our own sinfulness.

Again, if you read Psalm 19, that's the effect that he had on the psalmist. I've got some verses on the slide. His meditation on the law caused him to consider his own sinfulness and error.

Verse 11, By them your servant is won. In keeping them, there is great reward. But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

He's relying on the law to show him his errors. And so as we discover our own sinfulness, what it drives us to, just as it did with Israel, is God's promise of a Savior.

[22 : 04] It drives us to the cross of Jesus. The law, therefore, serves to remind us constantly of our need for grace, which we can only find in Jesus. And for those of us who are already believers in Jesus, this is such a comfort and joy, isn't it?

something that we can keep coming back to and we should keep coming back to, to thank God that because of Jesus, we are truly free from sin. And our relationship with God no longer depends on us obeying the demands of the law or any other moral code, which is impossible and which would crush us as an unbearable burden.

Instead, we belong to Christ by faith and we're now free to become what God intended for us.

Because, lastly, the third way we can relate to the law is that it gives us a vision of the type of people, both individually and corporately, that God is transforming us into.

Except, now, it's no longer a requirement for us to enter into His kingdom, but actually, it's the work that God is doing in and among us by His Spirit.

So, yes, the law still reflects God's standard for us as His people, but now, He's going to help us to become what He requires. And we'll look in chapter 4 and 5 and 6 more on that in Galatians.

[23 : 39] And so, it's no longer fear, is it? But anticipation that should fill our hearts. Like the psalmist in Psalm 19, we can come to the law with joy and anticipation because it does not condemn us anymore.

As he says on the slide, God's law is now more precious than gold, than much pure gold, and sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

We may not be perfect yet, but we can trust God now to be transforming us because we are in Christ into that perfection. And what a great encouragement that is for us to live for Him.

Well, let's pray. Father, thank You for Your Son, Jesus, who has freed us from the guardianship of the law and from the control of sin. Thank You that the law points us to Jesus and we pray that as we meditate on it, it will keep driving us to Jesus, to place our faith in Him, to marvel at what He has done for us and to give us great joy that we live by faith and not by observing the law.

In His mighty name we pray. Amen.