

Living By The Law

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Date: 07 June 1989

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[0 : 00] We're down in numbers a little bit today. Great disappointment to me, because last night at our church, we had about, it's a church that holds 600, and there was approximately 2,000 or more people there.

So that was a great moment in my life. It was lovely to see it all. And this was the Chinese service for the memorial for those who were killed in the Tiananmen Square. And it was a beautifully, I mean, it was run by some Chinese pastors here in town, and it was an amazing kind of service. I mean, very orderly and very quiet, but obviously people who felt very deeply about the issue and felt very keenly about those who had been killed in the events in Tiananmen Square, and they mourned them.

It occurred to me, thinking about it afterwards, that probably one of the essential things we should mourn in a situation like that is that people exactly like you and me can have boots and uniforms and guns and tanks and go in and shoot.

I mean, they're no different than we are, you know, that the people who were killed and the people who did the killing are the same people, essentially. And you see the huge potential in a sense of the love for freedom and democracy, which belonged to the students and was exemplified by them, and the forces of law and order, as people might think of them, that took up the guns and the tanks and went in shooting.

[1 : 49] And I think that if you look at these people, you can see the human problem. I'll give you another example of the human problem taken from Galatians chapter 3.

I always feel a bit sorry for you because basically we live in a world that looks like this, you see, that here I am, here is humanity, here is man or woman, and somewhere way off in the distance, so far away that you're not sure whether it's there or not, is God.

And we have times to discuss the possibility of whether, in fact, He exists or not. And that's the reality of our own lives and our own being and our own world and the corner of, where is this? Berard and Georgia has a great reality for us and God is very remote. But when you come in here and we start to read the Scriptures, exactly the opposite takes place, you know, that God is the great reality and there's this little thing over here called humanity or man and you wonder who is He.

So you have to move, and it's quite a shock to the system, from this reality and this remote possibility to this reality and this, and trying to figure out what this is all about. So that's what we're doing and I want you to look at Galatians.

[3 : 23] As it was read for us, I cringed a little bit because it really is fairly difficult to follow, isn't it? So I'm not going to follow at all. I'm going to move right down to verse 10 and try and follow through from there to explain to you what it's all about.

And if you look at the very last line, third from the bottom, fourth from the bottom, I guess, you'll see Abraham. Abraham appears a number of times in the whole passage, but it's near the bottom.

Now, Abraham is a man sort of at the dawn of history. And you have this man standing there and he's a peculiar man because God has called him out of his culture, out from among his people and said, go west, young man, go west.

And he went west and he went into the area of Palestine and there he was. And God promised him great things. He came to the point where he said, you promised me this.

I am disappointed in your promise. I have no child. I have a servant who has been with me these many years, Eleazar of Damascus, and he will inherit all I have because I have no child of my own.

[4 : 45] And God said, the Lord said to Abraham, come outside. And he took him outside and showed him the stars in the sky and he said, Abraham, your children will be more than the stars of

the sky.

But then comes the statement, the kind of fulcrum statement on which this whole passage depends. The fulcrum statement is, when he's writing about Abraham, it says about him that he believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Now that one verse is the pivotal verse almost in the whole of the New Testament. That you start with believing God and things go from there.

Now, what happens then, you see, is that Abraham becomes then the father of all the great religions of the world.

The Muslim, the Jew, the Christian, all look back to Abraham and say, that's the one through whom God initially broke into history.

[6:02] And so he's a man of tremendous importance in the whole history of all the religions of the world, but in many other ways he's a tremendous, a man of great stature.

But one of the promises that had been made to Abraham was that through him would all the nations of the earth be blessed, all the families of the earth be blessed.

You could take China, for example. You could take any nation you like because the promise said that through him all the nations would be blessed. Well, you get to the question, well, how are all the nations going to be blessed?

Well, when you start to think about that, you'll find there is, there's this program. There is blessing, which I put down here, and there is cursing, which I put down here, and that's what this passage deals with.

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse. But we thought it was Abraham who gave us the law through Moses, and we thought that was to be the source of our blessing.

[7:17] He told us how to live, and Paul says, all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. Now, look at that passage and read it carefully, because you go down to verse 11, and Paul says, it is evident that no man is justified by, no man is justified before God by the law.

So, something has happened. Is this law a blessing or a curse? And the law was given to Abraham's descendants, and they said, this law is the means by which the blessing of Abraham is going to be inherited.

In other words, as generation after generation comes along, as they confront the law and do it, so the blessing that was promised through Abraham will become theirs.

And so, you know how typically the Jewish people talk about the law. You know how the Muslims say, the law, the will of Allah, the law, that's it.

That's how God's blessing comes, is through the law. And that went on for many centuries, and people worked really hard at it, and somehow they couldn't do it, you know.

[8:50] They, so that what Paul says about the law is that it becomes not a blessing, but a cursing. Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law.

I don't want to get at the Masons here, but one of my good friends joined the Masons, you see, and I was trying to persuade him about how he might be well accepted by the Christian church, and he might find it was very significant to be a Christian.

And he was thinking about it, and he said, but you know, if you look at what the Masons code of ethics is, if people would behave that way, this world would be a superb place to live.

Now, that is not the example, that is just an example of how men keep going back to the law and saying, if only we will do what we're supposed to do, then everything will work, and everybody will be happy, and the whole world will be wonderfully blessed because people know what to do when they do it.

But Paul says, I'm sorry, the law is a curse, and it's a curse for the reason that, knowing what they should do, men don't do it.

[10:10] And so, instead of it being the source of blessing, it becomes the source of cursing. Well, you see, what happens then is along comes the person of Jesus Christ.

And what he does is he comes and he fulfills the law. But he also teaches, and he also heals, and he also performs miracles, and he also preaches to people.

He also teaches people how to pray. People are changed, and people begin to say, well, maybe the blessing of Abraham is not which hasn't come through the law, because if it was going to come through the law, then the Pharisees were the greatest people in the world, because they tried hardest to obey it.

Maybe the blessing is going to come through Jesus Christ. What man was there that has ever brought the dead back? What man was there that has ever been able to give sight to the blind? What man ever was there that was able to feed 5,000 with loaves and fishes? What man was there who spoke with authority as this man spoke? What man was there who promised a kingdom, and who revealed God to us as our father?

[11 : 34] This surely is the one through whom the blessing of Abraham is going to come to people. This man, Jesus Christ. God was there and so in a time, people became quite hysterical, slightly drunken in their spirituality, and said, this is it.

And when he came into Jerusalem, they said, Hosanna to the son of David. This is the king we're looking for. This is the person. And in his office, Caiaphas sat and watched, and he said, no, the blessing of Abraham comes through obedience to the law, not through this man.

And in order to demonstrate that that is so, he arranged his crucifixion. And you can read the story in any of the Gospels, that he arranged his crucifixion.

because he knew that written in the scriptures was the statement, cursed, and there it is right there. You can find it in this passage.

It says, cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree. From the ancient scriptures came this thing that the man on the cross is cursed, and that the curse of God has fallen upon him.

[13 : 03] I was reading the other day about 18th century England, and about how people were hanged for stealing a loaf of bread, or hanged for trespassing, or hanged for poaching a rabbit.

But in those days, they had, and this is what the story tells me, they had such a concept of the divine origin of the law, that when the judge passed the sentence of death on somebody, they said, well, that's not his judgment, that's the judgment of God passed by him to this person.

And so even the victim himself felt cursed by God, because he had been sentenced to death by hanging. He thought himself cursed by God.

So that we don't, we start worrying about the judge when that happens, but that's the way they thought of it. And certainly that's the way the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ, about anybody who is crucified, that he is cursed by God.

And so what the argument here is, is that, is really between whether Jesus is cursed or whether he is a blessing.

[14 : 29] And what Caiaphas and the Jewish establishment wanted to demonstrate was that Jesus was cursed. So Paul develops this argument and he says, well, there's two ways of being righteous.

There's one way, which is by obedience to the law. You're deeply concerned for civil rights. You're deeply concerned for the law and the fulfillment of the law.

And that's how you tell a just man. Somebody who is concerned for can keep the law and do it. That's where blessing is. And the man who doesn't do that is under a curse.

But Paul takes that argument and he turns it right upside down. He says, in fact, if you try to keep the law, you are under a curse because you can't do it.

You're just incapable of doing it. And so it's not you who try to keep the law who should be, who think, who, it's not you who keep the law who receive the blessing because all you do by trying to do it is find yourself condemned.

[15 : 43] It's though who, and it's Jesus Christ who kept the law, but instead of being blessed, he was cursed by being nailed to a tree. And you see, that's where the fulcrum about the centrality of Jesus Christ is.

Either he is the one through whom the blessing which God had promised from time immemorial to come to all the nations on the earth, either that is fulfilled in Christ, or it is fulfilled through moral and ethical obedience.

Well, Paul goes back and he says, look, the way you are accepted and become an inheritor of the blessing of God is through faith in the one who is accursed, because he alone met the demands of the law, and you who can't meet the demands of the law are made righteous through the death of Christ on the cross for you, because look what it says, he became a curse for us.

He became cursed for us in order that we might be blessed through him. And so you sort of change lines over here. That's what happens.

What they thought was to be a blessing, the keeping of the law becomes a curse, the one whom they thought was cursed becomes the means of blessing. blessing. And that's why you have this centrality of the person of Jesus Christ.

[17 : 21] Let me read to you what Martin Luther said about the law. He said there are two classes of doers of the law. True doers, he said, and hypocritical doers of the law.

The true doers of the law are those who are moved by faith in Jesus Christ to do the law. In other words, you live your life out of the primary reality of faith in Jesus Christ.

And Martin Luther says about the hypocritical doers of the law are those who seek to obtain righteousness by a mechanical performance of good works while their hearts are far from God.

Well, now, let me just conclude by giving you this picture. There's so much here, and I feel a little bit overwhelmed by that. But let me try and give you this picture.

What happens is that we stand here like this, you see, and we set the law up here like this, and we graduated up here like this, and we look at our lives and we try and obey it.

[18 : 35] And we say, well, I'm about here now and I'm going to try particularly hard this weekend so that by Monday I should be here, and by the end of the month I should be up here, and I'm working towards ultimate perfection, and that's how I live my religious life.

And Paul says, that's, or Martin Luther says, that's sheer hypocrisy, because all you do is get up to here and fall back to here again, and you get frustrated and frustrated with that reality.

You say, I can't do it, I'm not getting anywhere. Every time I try to get up there, I fall back. And yet, that's how we try. Now, over here, you have the person of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And what Paul says is this, the one who met this standard, the only one, is Jesus Christ. Therefore, he is the one through whom the blessing comes.

And it comes to you, not by trying to do this, but by putting your faith in Jesus Christ. Now, another way that you can perhaps illustrate that is this.

[19 : 47] You see, when God gave the Ten Commandments, he said, the first and great commandment is this, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength.

That's the first and great commandment. Then it goes on to tell you about observing Sundays and honoring your parents and murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and covetousness.

But what happens is that people think that by doing this, they can have a righteousness apart from God. But what they're doing is omitting the first commandment.

And that is the only way that you can deal with the law is first by loving God. If you don't love Him, then this is just going to prove to be sheer hypocrisy.

If you do love Him, then you will have met Him in Jesus Christ, and then you will have Jesus Christ as the one in whom the love of God is revealed to you, and in whom you can respond in love to God in the person of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 56] So you start by loving and then live. The other people put it around, they start by legalizing in the hope that they one day will live. But you start by loving, and that's why it says that we have to start with Jesus Christ.

Give me two minutes more. You look so puzzled, I feel anxious about you all, and I confused you hopelessly. Let me give you one more story, and then I'll quit. Jesus met with some people who had begun to believe in Him.

No great shakes, but generally speaking, they believed in Him. So He said to them, good. Now, if you will continue in My Word, you will be My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

You've all heard that statement, I'm sure. And they listened to Him and said, but we are the children of Abraham. We're not slaves to anybody.

We're free now. Well, Jesus said, well, I want to tell you that everyone who sins is the slave of sin. You don't do it because you choose to do it necessarily.

[22 : 09] You do it because you have to do it. That's the way you behave. And He said, in terms of a relationship to God, He hasn't made you slaves, He's made you sons.

So unless the Son makes you free, you're not going to be free. You're going to be enslaved by the reality of sin. Unless Christ Himself sets you free by His death on the cross.

You're going to continue in that. And they said to Him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said, if Abraham is your father, then you would love me because you would understand what Abraham did. That is, he believed God. And it was reckoned to him as righteousness. So if Abraham is your father, you would love me. But you seek to kill me.

Well, the argument goes on for the rest of chapter 8, and then they take him out to stone him. Because who they are and who he is are completely at opposites. And that's, you see, where the problem is.

[23 : 24] That the problem of seeking righteousness by the law is that you are blaspheming the means by which God chooses that you should be righteous.

And that is through faith in Jesus Christ. And it is through faith in Jesus Christ that the ancient blessing of Abraham comes on his people. Amen.

Let me say a prayer. Our God, we live in the midst of a world that is full of passion and hate and violence and hope and aspiration and longing.

And we need to know what your ancient promises are and how we become the inheritors of those promises. Give us ears to hear what Paul has taught us as he wrote to the Galatians.

And may those words be your message to us. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.