For two months now you’ve heard again and again from this pulpit that obedience to the Law, or human effort of any kind, cannot save a person. After all, that’s one of the principal messages of the book of Galatians. No matter how long your list of religious rules and regulations, and no matter how diligent you have been in trying to keep them, you know you have failed to keep them completely or consistently, and so it is impossible to get right with God by that means.

Three weeks ago Pastor Dick added the surprising truth from Galatians 3:1-5 that the Law, or human effort of any kind, cannot even sanctify, i.e. it can’t even help you grow spiritually. Remember Paul’s question: “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit (i.e. after being saved), are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” This was addressed to those who perhaps agreed that one must be saved by faith but thought they had to keep themselves saved by human effort.

And then last week Pastor Jeremy took us to the most revered religious leader in history, Abraham (viewed as the founder of three of the world’s greatest religions–Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) and showed us from Galatians 3:6-14 that Abraham was made right with God not by works or by religious rites and rituals. Instead he just believed God and was made right with Him on that basis.

Now my suspicion is that over these weeks at least a few of you have developed a question in your mind. If the Law can’t save, and if the Law can’t sanctify, and if the preeminent man of faith was saved by believing, not by achieving, then why in the world did God give the Law in the first place? Why these 613 regulations in the OT that governed virtually every area of a Jewish person’s life? And why the laws in the NT that put boundaries on our behavior and threaten us with discipline if we violate them?

That is going to be the primary theme of our Scripture passage today. In fact, in Galatians 3:19 the Apostle Paul asks the specific question, “What, then, was the purpose of the law?” But before he asks and answers that question, we discover that he hasn’t quite finished with Abraham. So let’s read the paragraph from Galatians chapter 3, verse 15 through 18:

> Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

Let me summarize this paragraph this way:

The Law, coming four centuries after the Abrahamic Covenant, cannot annul or change the way God chose to deal with Abraham and his spiritual descendants, namely by grace.
(promise) and on the basis of faith.

The Judaizers, the legalists against whom Paul has been arguing in this book, may have been willing to grant Paul’s earlier point that Abraham was justified by faith. But they would no doubt have retorted that when the Law was given by Moses that changed everything. With the addition of the Law new requirements for salvation were added. Circumcision, sabbath-keeping, tithing, etc. now become necessary for a right standing with God.

Anticipating this objection, Paul uses a common illustration to show its fallacy: “Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.” In order to grasp his point, we have to understand the difference between a contract and a covenant. A contract is an arrangement based in law between two parties where each one agrees to meet certain stipulations, provided the other party meets his obligations. If one side fails to live up to the contract, it becomes null and void. A covenant, however, is a unilateral promise that one person makes, guaranteeing to bless, provide for or protect the other party no matter what. A mortgage is an example of a contract; a will or a marriage is an example of a covenant.

What God established with Abraham was not a contract but a covenant, a unilateral agreement in which God promised to bless Abraham, the man of faith, plus all of Abraham’s descendants (not his physical descendants but spiritual descendants). Of course, God’s character stands behind His covenant. He is always faithful to His promises and will never go back on his word or change the rules in the middle of the game.

Now the Mosaic Law— that set of rules and regulations which the legalists thought so important in earning God’s favor—was introduced 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant was established, Paul points out in verse 17. It cannot, therefore, set aside the covenant, nor can it do away with the promises God made to Abraham.

Paul continues his argument in verse 18 by telling the legalists that they can’t have it both ways. Either salvation comes by faith in the promises of God or it comes by trying to obey the Law, but it can’t be both. “For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”

Consider the difference between an employment contract and a will (which is a kind of covenant). If you are promised a bonus in an employment contract, then if you fulfill your duties as an employee, you get the bonus; if not, you don’t. On the other hand, if you are promised an inheritance in a will, it doesn’t depend upon what you do; it depends only upon the desire of the one who makes the will.

So also with our spiritual inheritance, our salvation. Since God in His grace promised a spiritual inheritance to Abraham and all those who share Abraham’s faith (look at verse 9: “So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”), it can’t have anything to do with
the Mosaic Law which didn’t appear until four centuries later!

In verse 16 Paul mentions that God’s promise was to Abraham and to his seed. Then he adds, “The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.” Paul sees in the fact that the singular is used in Genesis 12:7 that the preeminent application of the promise is to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. But if you look down at verse 29 you will see that all who belong to Christ are included among Abraham’s seed. In other words, all of us become heirs of the promise of salvation the same way Abraham became an heir—by grace through faith.

So let me summarize. God dealt with Abraham by giving him promises. Those promises didn’t hinge upon Abraham’s obedience; they weren’t the kind of promises that say, “I will do this for you if you will do such-and such.” God simply told Abraham, “In your seed all the nations of the world will be blessed,” and that promise was fulfilled with the coming of Messiah Jesus.

Abraham believed God’s promise and God saved him on the basis of his faith. We, too, are saved the same way.

Centuries after God’s covenant with Abraham, Moses gave the Law to the Israelites. Can it set aside the covenant or add a new requirement for salvation? Of course not, because God’s promise to Abraham was unconditional. There were no strings attached, no works to perform, no laws to obey, no merit to establish, no conditions to fulfill. Like a human will, God’s promise to Abraham is unalterable by anyone other than the one who made it. It is still in force today, for it has never been rescinded. God does not make promises in order to break them. He has never annulled or modified His will in the matter of salvation.

Now we return to the principal question of today: If the Mosaic Law wasn’t given to help with man’s salvation, why was it given? Let’s read Paul’s answer in the rest of our text for today, Galatians 3:19-25.

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

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 the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

There is a lot of confusion over the Law and what part it plays in the Christian’s life. Don’t we
need to obey God so that He will keep on loving us? If things are going well for us, isn’t that a guarantee that God is pleased, and if they are not going well doesn’t that mean He is angry with us? The answer to these questions is very simply, “No.” They represent a terrible misunderstanding of the purpose of the Law.

I think we will get the most out of this passage if we will first focus on the liabilities of the Law, then the necessity for it, and finally the purpose of the Law.

The Law’s liabilities

1. It was an “afterthought.” (19) Verse 19 tells us “It was added because of transgressions.” I put the word “afterthought” in quotation marks, because nothing is really an afterthought to God, but from the human perspective the law was added as a corrective measure to deal with a growing sin problem that had arisen among His people. God deemed it necessary to spell out more clearly and precisely what was permitted and what was forbidden.

2. It was temporary. (19) It was added until Christ came. God never intended for the Mosaic Law to continue as a rule of life for Jewish people or anyone else after the coming of Messiah. Of course, certain principles found in the Law, such as the Ten Commandments, are timeless and are the expression of God's will for man before the time of Moses, during the Mosaic period, and to this very day. That’s why they are repeated in the NT (all but the Sabbath commandment, i.e., and even the Sabbath principle is found in the NT). Not so with most of the rest of the Mosaic Law—the dietary laws, the ceremonial laws, the sacrificial system—they were all temporary, designed to keep Israel healthy, safe and prosperous during the wilderness wanderings until their Messiah arrived.

3. It was given through intermediaries. (19b-20) At the end of verse 19 we read, “The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party, but God is one.” This is a difficult verse, so let me paraphrase it: “God gave his laws to angels to give to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is needed if two people enter into a contract, but God acted on his own when he made his promise to Abraham.” Paul is trying to point out the inferiority of the law to the promise. The promise (the Gospel) was given directly by God; the Law was given indirectly. Therefore, promise trumps law.

4. It was helpless to impart life. (21) Look at verse 21: “If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.” Unfortunately, that’s not the case, because as we saw so clearly last week in verse 10, no one can keep the Law thoroughly and continually. Therefore a right standing with God cannot be achieved that way. That doesn’t mean, of course, that the law is in any way against the promises of God (verse 21a). They were both divinely given, but for two entirely different purposes.

Enough about the Law's liabilities. They are many and they are significant. But why did God
institute something which had so many liabilities? Why didn't He just skip the Mosaic Law and bring Christ into the world without it? What was it that made the Law necessary?

The Law's necessity

1. Society became more complex. When God first created man he dealt with him primarily on the basis of conscience and through direct revelation. The basic moral law of God was written on every man's heart, and in addition God communicated His will directly to His creatures. At the time of the great Flood it appears that a brief code of laws was established for the stability of human society, but still there was no detailed ordering of human behavior through rules and regulations.

However, by the time of Moses, human society had become much more complex. With the nation of Israel numbering upwards of several million, and with a difficult trek of 40 years and a challenging conquest of the Holy Land lying ahead of them, God determined that a detailed code of laws was needed for the welfare of His people. After all, to mobilize a group that large without total chaos would take a lot of rules and regulations.

2. Human rationalization called for a clearer definition of sin. The human species has demonstrated itself to be a master at rationalization. Give a man a general moral principle and he will find so many loopholes for his own behavior that it will make your head swim. Some fairly well-known theologians in the late 60's and 70's developed elaborate justifications for all kinds of sin, based on the Biblical principle that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Their view was called Situation Ethics. Their argument was that sometimes the loving thing to do to your neighbor is to lie to him or pull his plug when he's terminally ill or even to commit murder (abortion).

When I was growing up in St. Louis in the 1950's Missouri had no state speed limit. Once you got out past the suburbs the highway signs just said “safe and reasonable.” It was a great idea. It wasn’t too long, however, when “safe and reasonable” needed clearer definition. People were justifying all sorts of bizarre highway insanity on the grounds that there was no law against it. I doubt if that approach would work even with a country full of Christians.

Paul elaborates on this need for a clearer definition of sin in Romans 7:7: “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.’” I think it is no accident that the Apostle takes as his example an area of sinful behavior which is especially easy to rationalize, namely coveting. In essence he says, “I wouldn't have been able to apply the principle against coveting rightly, had not the Tenth Commandment said specifically, “Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's house, wife, servant, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Of course, even when sin is as clearly defined as that, some people will still rationalize by asking, “Who is my neighbor?” (As a certain expert in the law asked Jesus in Luke 10). Unless a person has
a vital relationship with the Holy Spirit, he needs for sin to be defined with great clarity to prevent rationalization and self-justification.

3. Punishment demands a standard. It's one of the hallmarks of democratic government that a man can't be convicted of a crime if there is no law on the books specifying His action as criminal at the time he committed it. That is a hallmark of Paul's theology as well. He says in Romans 4:15: “Where there is no Law, there is no violation.” Therefore, if God is going to punish mankind or discipline His children for sinful acts it is necessary that the Law specify what those acts are.

Now there's an interesting angle to this given in Romans 2, where the Apostle takes up the question, “What about the heathen who have never heard of the Mosaic Law?” The answer is that even the heathen know the basic moral law of God, (the Ten Commandments) because it is written on their hearts. And that's all God is going to judge them for. God isn't going to judge a pagan for not tithing or for not going to church, but He will judge him for murder, adultery, and idolatry, which everyone knows innately and intuitively to be wrong.

Now finally this morning we come to the question we started with, "Why, then, the Law?" What is the Law's purpose? We've seen the its Liabilities and its Necessity. Let's look thirdly at the Law's Purpose. I believe it is threefold.

The Law's Purpose

1. It was designed to put a lid on sin. This is not specifically addressed in our text, but I think it is so obvious that it must be mentioned. Where there is no law there is anarchy. Political scientists and sociologists have generally agreed that the worst possible form of government is no government–anarchy, lawlessness–worse than communism, worse than fascism, worse even than rule by the clergy, such as in Iran today. The law goes a long way toward putting a lid on anarchy. It doesn't eliminate sin; it doesn't even change the moral character of the people under it, but it does at least limit the public display of sin.

If you don't understand that, go to San Francisco for a weekend. Only don't take your children. San Francisco doesn't have the laws we have to prevent outrageous public displays of revolting and degrading immorality. Our laws keep a lid on this kind of public flaunting of unrighteousness. It doesn't eliminate it, and I'm sure that those who want it can find it, but the law does restrict it. Where would you rather live, here or in San Francisco? Where would you rather rear your children? For the good of human society God has designed law for the purpose of keeping a lid on sin.

2. It was designed to awaken the awareness of sin. At the same time the law is keeping a lid on sin for society, it is fulfilling another purpose for individuals– showing them just how sinful they are and the awful consequences of sin. That's Paul's point in Romans 7, but the same truth is taught here in Gal. 3:22-23, when it says that “the whole world is a prisoner of sin” and that “we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.” A prisoner is someone who is considered guilty of a crime and is held in restrictive custody. The law rightly condemns us in our
sin and holds us as prisoners under a sentence of guilt.

But the law not only condemns us in our guilt, it makes us even more guilty by driving us to sin even more. That is the irony of the law. It is intended to restrain evil, but in condemning us, drives us to greater sin and greater condemnation! I was in St. Louis last weekend. In the hills of West County there are any number of secluded driveways with a sign, “Private: Do not enter.” Why is it those are the only ones I want to drive down? It’s not the sign’s fault or the owner’s fault that I want to trespass; it’s my fault. There is something in each of us that is bent on disobeying, cheating, taking what isn’t ours, and then lying about it, especially after we’re told not to.

Now God had to give us the bad news before he could give us the good. It was never His purpose to abandon us in this despairing situation. And thus the final purpose for the Law becomes by far the most important one.

3. It was designed to lead people to Christ. (24-25) Verse 24: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” The Mosaic Law was like an ancient custodian placed in charge over us. The word used in the original Greek signifies a household slave who was in charge of a child’s moral welfare. It was his duty to see that the child ran into no unnecessary temptations or dangers and to see that he eventually acquired the qualities essential to true adulthood. One of his special duties was to take the child to and from school.

That, says Paul, is like the function of the Law. The law was there to bring a man to Christ by showing him that in himself he is utterly unable to keep the Law. And just as the ancient custodian wasn't any longer in charge once the child arrived at school, so the one who has come to Christ no longer needs to be under the dominance of the law. The law will no longer be a way of life for him. Christ will be his way of life.

We've talked mostly this morning about the Mosaic Law. But the truths we have discussed are applicable to other law systems as well. Think about the laws of the nation or the laws of some organization you belong to or even your own personal moral code. How well do you keep these laws? When was the last time you went 60 in a 55 mile speed zone? Or failed to come to a complete stop at a stop sign? Or succumbed to a habit that on January 1 you resolved to forego? This passage applies to every one of us.

Conclusion. I want to close this morning by asking us to think about God and His law in terms of a parenting relationship. In God’s design for the human family parents love their children unconditionally. Children have no say in whether, when or how they are born; they simply inherit the love of their parents. Our parents entered into a covenant of love with each one of us—to care for us, teach us, discipline us, provide for us.

Parents also add laws to the relationship as the child grows up—chores, curfews, house rules. But those laws are never intended to become the basis for the relationship. Following the family rules is
never what makes one a true child. Speaking for myself, no matter how I obeyed or even whether I obeyed, my parents never wavered in their love for me. They set limits on my behavior, but they didn't wait to see if I would obey to decide whether I deserved to be treated as a son.

Furthermore, obeying our parents' rules doesn't earn their love, care and protection. Those are not things we do to become a child, but rather because we are already their children. We are children by birth, not by obedience.

Now I recognize that some homes are dysfunctional, and some parents fail to demonstrate this kind of love. But that doesn't nullify the illustration. I am talking about how we all know God designed the home.

Friend, if you are a child of God by the new birth through faith in Jesus Christ, God will never make his love and approval conditional on your obedience to His Law. He desires your obedience, He provides His Holy Spirit to help you obey, He promises blessing when you do obey and discipline when you don't. But when you fail it doesn't result in your removal from the family.

The bottom line is that God’s Law makes a wonderful mirror, but a terrible washcloth. We need to let it do the work it was intended to do—nothing more and nothing less.

Let the Law show us how sinful we are and how much we need the Savior. Believe God when He says, “You can't make it on your own. Let me help. I sent My only Son to redeem you from the curse of the Law by dying in your place on Calvary. Then I sent My Holy Spirit to give you the power to conform your lives to my righteous expectations.” Trust Him in faith today.