

“Your Get Out of Jail Free Card”

Galatians 3:19-29

Series: Be Free Week 3. Free from Unreasonable Demands

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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How many of you like taxes? Nobody! How many would be happy if your tax burden was reduced from what you pay now down to 1%? Believe it or not, that is what Americans paid under the Stamp Act of 1765. 1% - far less than the 5-7% paid by those who lived in England. What's more, the Stamp Act tax on newspapers, pamphlets, legal documents, land purchases went to pay for the cost of the British armies which fought the French and Indian War and defended the frontier – British armies which once included George Washington and other patriots.

People didn't object to the cost of the Stamp Act. In fact, our own Ben Franklin, ever the businessman, tried to cash in on it. He changed his mind when a Philly mob threatened to attack his home (see: Philly fans were even bad back then).

Yet most historians say the Stamp Act was the spark which ignited the rebellion – the Revolution whose 250th anniversary we celebrate this year. Why? They weren't against taxes, government or being British. At first, they weren't even against the King. Their main complaint was “No taxation without representation.” They had no representatives in Parliament. They had no say in the tax. Samuel Adams said:

If taxes are laid upon us in any shape without ever having a legal representative where they are laid, are we not reduced from the character of free subjects to the miserable state of tributary slaves?

You wonder what the colonists would do if they paid the taxes we do today.

Laws, governments and even taxes can be good things if handled well. Yet good things can get out of control – they can even turn into tyrants. They can make us prisoners. The Torah or Law of Moses was a good thing. Before he met Jesus, Paul was zealous for the Law. It was his mission to make people obey the Law. Then God changed his heart with Grace. His relationship with God was no longer based on the Law of Moses but on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He preached this message to the Jews and Gentiles of Galatia, they believed and received the Holy Spirit. The Jews turned from the Law to Christ. The Gentiles gave up their pagan idols for the Lord.

Yet when Paul leaves Galatia and returns to Antioch, another group of Jewish Christians moves in. They zealously obey the Law. They believe every Christian should follow the Torah and every Gentile must first become a Jew to be a Christian. Call them the Torah Police. They say Paul is wrong. You can see why the Galatians listen to them:

- The Torah came from God through Moses. It must be good.

- The Jewish people followed the Torah for more than a thousand years. It kept them connected to God and each other.
- Jesus and his first followers were Jews who lived by the Torah.
- Paul was not an original disciple. He's at best a latecomer and at worst a persecutor of Christians. He was not there on Easter to see the Risen Jesus or on Pentecost to receive the Holy Spirit.
- It's rumored the chief apostles in Jerusalem don't agree with Paul.
- His concept of Grace is too loose and easy. God told His people to fall the Law to please Him. Paul is all wrong.

So the Galatians believe the Torah Police.

When Paul hears this, he writes a letter using his most gentle, diplomatic skills.

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Galatians 3:1-3

Do you feel the heat? Why is Paul so agitated? The whole Gospel is at stake. Either your relationship with God is based on the Law or on Grace. Paul firmly believes the Torah Police are turning a good thing – the Law – it into an unreasonable, impossible demand.

Have you ever wrestled with an unreasonable, impossible demand?

- A juggling act in which you desperately try to meet everyone's needs and requests.
- A person in your life who will not listen, compromise, or admit a mistake.
- A person who is never satisfied and always negative no matter what you do.
- A person who cannot control his or her behavior and expects you to save the day.

Like all these impossible demands, Paul knows no one can perfectly obey the Law, not even the Torah Police. Yet they use the Law to lock up the Galatians in a prison. Now the Galatians must have asked Paul, “Is the Law wrong? Didn't God give us the Law? Don't we need Laws?” In chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul explains the purpose of the Law and shows us how to handle other impossible demands.

First, **The Law is like a Covid Test for Sin**

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions
Galatians 3:19

The infection of sin has spread throughout the world. The positivity rate is 100% Nobody is immune to it. But we are not always aware of it. God gave the Law to reveal that we sin and just how impossible it is to stop sinning.

Do you remember your first Covid Test? Lisa and I had to get a Covid Test to gain admission to a Caribbean island. Though we were symptom free, we were nervous about failing the test and facing the cancellation and the loss of all we paid for the trip. So I willingly paid for someone to stick the longest Qtip ever up both nostrils. It felt like it scratched the back of my skull and was about to turn left and come out my ear. And then came the spin cycle. Since this was a rapid test, we waited outside for them to text us the results. That was the longest ten minutes of the pandemic. The longer it went, the more I feared we failed. It's the only time I was super positive about being negative.

Like a Covid Test, the Law reveals the evidence of sin. If you fail this test, you cannot enter God's Kingdom. Unfortunately for us, this test reveals we are all infected. You might be able to perfectly obey God's Law for a minute but not for a lifetime. The Law reveals to us the depth of our condition.

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. Galatians 3:21-22

The Law does not break us free from sin. It proves we are completely bound by sin. In fact, sometimes we do things just because the Law says don't. Haddon Robinson writes,

Several years ago in Galveston, Texas, they built a high-rise hotel out over the Gulf of Mexico. Before its grand opening, someone thought, *What if people decide to fish out the hotel windows?* So they placed signs in the hotel rooms, "No fishing out the hotel windows." Many ignored the signs, however, and it created a difficult problem. Lines got snarled. People in the dining room saw fish flapping against the picture windows. The manager of the hotel solved it all by taking down those little signs. No one checks into a hotel room thinking about fishing out of the windows. The law, although well-intentioned, created the problem.¹

The Law reveals the evidence of sin. We are powerless to free ourselves from the prison of sin. In fact, the Law reveals we are under God's curse. Quoting the Law, Paul writes,

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law. Galatians 3:10-11

We would be in deep trouble if that's the end of the story. But praise God it isn't.

Second, **The Law Leads Us to Christ's Cure**

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! 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. Galatians 3:21-22

¹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Baker Academic, 2001), p. 100

The point of the Law is not just to tell us we are bad but to point to the One who is good, not just to reveal the curse of sin but to lead us to the One who is the cure.

Jews believe the Messiah lives forever. To many Jews, Jesus' death is a clear proof He was not the Messiah. A further proof is the way He died. He was crucified. The Law clearly states in Deuteronomy 21:23, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." When Paul preaches the Good News in synagogues many Jews point to this verse as evidence Jesus was a sinner not the Messiah. He was cursed by God. At this point I imagine Paul pauses, smiles and says, "You are absolutely right. He was cursed by God. But that proves He is the Messiah. He took the curse not for His sins but for our sins."

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." Galatians 3:13.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus opens the prison door of sin.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. Galatians 3:23

Faith in Jesus is your "Get Out of Jail Free Card." When you take it and walk out the prison door, there's a third way the Law can help.

The Law Becomes Our Compass Within. Paul adds,

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. Galatians 3:24-25

If you ask international visitors to the World Cup, "Who is the most famous Philadelphian?" They won't say Ben Franklin. They'll say, "Rocky!" In the first movie, Rocky fights Heavy Weight Champion Apollo Creed. Rocky narrowly loses leading to Rocky II in which he beats Creed and becomes Heavy Weight Champion. This brings up Rocky III in which Rocky must now beat, Mr. T. But Rocky's trainer Mickey dies. Who is going to train Rocky? The old adversary Apollo Creed guides Rocky to victory.

The Law was once our adversary. It proved we were sinners. It pronounced the curse of God on us. We boxed with it and lost every time. Yet when we put our faith in Christ and receive His victory over sin suddenly our relationship to the Law changes completely. Now the Law, like Apollo Creed, is our guide, trainer, friend. But this time it's an inside job. Catherine Booth, a cofounder of the Salvation Army once said,

What the law tried to do by a restraining power from without, the gospel does by an inspiring power from within.²

That inspiring power is the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes in and helps you obey the Law. It becomes your internal compass directing you to go God's way.

² Catherine Booth. "William and Catherine Booth," Christian History, no. 26.

The Law shows we are infected with sin, it leads us to Christ's cure and then, by the power of the Spirit, points the way. In essence the message is: "You can't, God can, So follow Him." How do you deal with an unreasonable, impossible demanding person? How do you meet everyone's need and requests? You can't. God can. So follow Him. How do you deal with a person who will not listen, compromise or admit a mistake? You can't. God can. So follow Him. How do you handle a person you can't satisfy no matter how much you do? You can't. God can. So follow Him. How do you save someone who can't control his or her behavior? You can't. God can. So follow Him.

Fernie's mother learned this truth the hard way. Pastor Jim Cymbala writes that for years Fernando "Fernie" Aranda only knew street violence, stealing and drugs. He was arrested, convicted and sentenced to serve a 25-years-to-life. Yet being in the penitentiary didn't make Fernie very penitent. He continued his violent streak inside and was, at one point, a suspect in the deaths of three inmates. Only his 70-year-old mother could break through his cold stony heart. While visiting him in prison she broke down in tears and said, "I don't want to die seeing you in this condition."

Fernie was broken. He bowed his head and simply prayed, "O God, if you'll get me out of this hellhole, I promise I'll serve you for the rest of my life." A year later, after serving only half his sentence, Fernie was unexpectedly released from prison.

Now it would be nice to say Fernie stayed clean. But like many former inmates he fell back into his old crowd and lifestyle. Once more heavy into drugs, he and a friend were looking to score some dope when the Drug Enforcement Task Force made an appearance on the street. One drug test and he would be back in prison. So he ran.

Spotting a crowd in a nearby park he went over to seek cover among them. Then something unexpected happened – something that would forever change his life. A man came up to Fernie and said, "Hey, guess what? Jesus loves you." Fernie couldn't believe it. He'd stumbled on a street rally by a group called Victory Outreach Ministries. He wanted to get away from these losers but the police were circling, so he decided to stay put. What happened next was a God thing. As Fernie tells it:

I'd never seen any of these people in my life. But a young man named Louie approached me next. He looked sort of like the Marlboro Man—big muscles, big mustache. He walked up to me and boldly said, 'Hey bro—don't you remember the day you prayed in your prison cell, that if God would release you from that hellhole, you'd serve him the rest of your life?'

"I couldn't believe it! I was stunned. How could this man know anything about my prayer...?" "I suddenly felt I was no longer hearing the voice of man. It was the voice of God." Before Fernie could reply, the man pointed a finger right between his eyes and said, "And you know what you have to do."

This was enough to make Fernando Aranda crumple to his knees there on the grass. He began to weep. "God, I'm sorry! Forgive me all my sins." The power of God was driving this tough criminal to the point of full surrender.

That day Fernie went to stay in one of the homes provided by Victory Outreach Ministries, where he could learn about God's love in a safe place alongside other men with similar problems. While he was there Fernie's mother came to see him. Her prayer was answered. Her last view of her son was not in prison. He was truly free.³

When you face an impossible demand beyond your control, remember:

You can't
God can
So follow him.

³ Jim Cymbala, *You Were Made for More* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 54-57