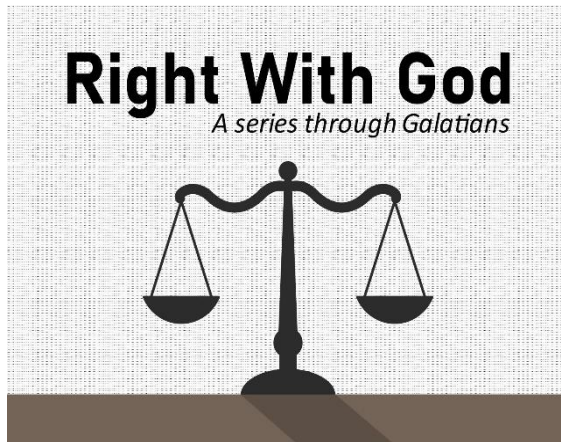




Part 8 – The Law and the Promise

Galatians 3:15-22

In these verses Paul continues to make his case that the children of Abraham are those from all nations who are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. This was a sharp contrast to the typical Jewish viewpoint of the day that being right with God was connected to one's heredity; that is, one's physical connection to the Jewish people. The Judaizing Christians troubling the churches in Galatia taught (not unlike the Jewish non-Christians of the day) that one's righteousness before God was due at least in part to one's obedience to the law of God.

We must not misunderstand Paul at this point. God's law is good and perfect. It reflects the Lord's own righteousness. And, as we will see, God's law serves a good purpose both in the lives of sinners and in the lives of God's people. But God's law cannot and never was intended to contribute to the justification of sinners. God's law cannot justify a single sinner because a sinner cannot obey God's law perfectly in thought, word, and deed which is precisely what the law requires.

1. Did Moses change Abraham?

Vv. 15-18

- It seems that the “false brothers” preaching to the churches of Galatia taught the Scriptures in such a way as to give God's covenant with Moses priority over God's covenant with Abraham. In other words, it appears that they were teaching that, since it came later, God's covenant with Moses (which included the giving of the law) must have some sort of priority over the earlier covenant with Abraham.
- In verse 15 Paul employs an example from their own experience to show how their reasoning is flawed. Even in human relations, a will or covenant is binding. In giving his people the law through Moses, God was not changing the covenant he made with Abraham. He was not adding the condition of human merit to the one condition of faith. God promised Abraham a salvation that would be based entirely upon grace alone through faith alone in the completed work of Christ alone. The law was not added to change that.

Vs. 16 – “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring...”

- Paul now reminds us that the covenant made with Abraham was also extended to his offspring; his descendants. Paul makes the point that it was his “offspring” not “offsprings” to whom the promise was given. It is true that the term offspring (or seed) is a collective singular meaning that although it is a singular noun it often refers to a collective. The term translated *offspring* or *seed* in the Old Testament is used in both senses depending on the context. In terms of the Covenant of Grace both the singular and collective senses are important. On the one hand, Abraham's offspring are all of those down through the ages who will believe. On the other hand, Abraham's offspring is to be understood in a singular sense pointing to God's authority in election. For instance, Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. But the promise was transmitted only through Isaac. Likewise, Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. But it was only Jacob through whom the promise was transmitted. Ultimately it is Jesus, the greatest of Abraham's offspring who is the culmination and fulfilment of the Covenant of Grace. He is the great and final seed of Abraham.

Vs. 17 – “This is what I mean...”

- The covenant with Moses came 430 years after the covenant made with Abraham (probably dated from events described in Genesis 28:14). Paul's point is that in giving his law to the people, God did not alter or annul the promise of grace he made to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Abraham received his blessings as a result of God's promise, not the result of his own merit. The same was true for Moses and for all the multitudes down through the ages who have believed.

Vs. 18 – “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”

- Here Paul uses a word/concept which is important to what he argues going forward: “Inheritance.” God’s promise to Abraham involved the principle of inheritance. In the case of Abraham, the inheritance is Christ and all of the blessings associated with the work of Christ for all those who, like Abraham, believe. “And it is just here that an important perspective on Paul’s argument emerges. ‘Promise,’ by its nature, involves a free and unconstrained decision to commit oneself or specific objects to another. It is this nature of promise that Paul highlights in order to show why the inheritance cannot be based on the law. As Paul has explained in Galatians 3:12, ‘law’ operates according to the principle of doing: it demands work.”¹
- In contrast to grace operating through faith alone, the law is “not a channel of blessing or inheritance, because its nature contradicts the fundamentally gracious manner in which God bestows his blessing on his people.”² But this is not because there is something wrong with God’s law. Quite the contrary. It is because the law cannot be, nor was it ever intended to be, a way of salvation for sinners. So the question of whether Moses changes Abraham may also be framed this way: Did the law replace the inheritance? Did God annul or alter his promise of justification by faith alone when he gave the law? Absolutely not!

2. Why the law?

Vv. 19-20

- The Galatian heresy offers an answer to the question, “Why the law?”: Obedience to the law aids sinners in their justification before God. By identifying this teaching as a damnable false gospel, Paul must now address the question himself. Since the law cannot justify sinners why did God give it? If God’s law was not given as a means to justify sinners, then what purpose does it serve? Paul answers this in two ways.

A) The law was added to deal with sins.

- “It was added because of transgressions...” (vs. 19b) – The law was added to deal with sin in the sense that it was given to agitate the conscience of sinners. That is, it was given so that sinners would see and recognize their sin and be driven to repentance. The law was given to help us see that sin is actually the breaking of God’s law. Sin is more than brokenness. Sin is not merely liking good things too much. Sin is the transgressing of God’s law.

B) The law (its ceremonial applications) was given as a temporary sign pointing to the work of Christ.

- It’s important to note at this point that when the Bible refers to “the law” we need to look to the context to help us understand if the law being referred is the entire body of God’s law, the ceremonial and civil laws which governed Israel in the Land, or the eternal moral law of God (10 Commandments). In Galatians, Paul is typically addressing the ceremonial administration of God’s moral law such as circumcision, the dietary code, and the various feast days. These along with the sacrifices prescribed were temporary signs pointing to Christ and never meant to be practiced after their fulfillment (Hebrews 10:1-12).

3. Is the law at odds with the promise?

Vv. 21-22

- Given the difference in nature and purpose between the law and the promise, Paul asks an obvious question: “Is the law, then, against the promise of God?” (21a). His answer is emphatic: “By no means...” (21b). God’s promise and God’s law are not at cross-purposes. The law does not abolish the promise (grace). But neither does the promise abolish the purpose of the law. In the life of the believer, God’s law serves an important function in calling us to joyful obedience. But the law cannot impart life.
- The law “has imprisoned everything under sin” (vs.22) meaning that it has stripped us of any notion that we can merit righteousness. The Scriptures reveal that we are imprisoned to sin’s dominion. And the only way out of being justly condemned is through Jesus Christ. Specifically, by believing in Christ and his finished work – “So that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”
- The law convicts the sinner and guides the believer. But only the promise working through faith alone in Christ alone can justify the sinner before his Creator and King.

¹ Douglas Moo, *Galatians* (BECNT) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) p. 231

² Ibid, 232