

June 3, 2007

“Letting the Law Do Its Job” Galatians 3:19-25

FCF: Not seeing our need for the gospel

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The law has an intended purpose.

(anchor) We must recognize what it is and let it do its job.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

If you want to see the stars and you live close to the city, you have a problem. It's called “light pollution” – manmade light so bright the sky becomes less dark, limiting our ability to see, to discover and discern the beauty and wonder of the expanse of the sky.

Our inability to see the stars' brightness against the sky's blackness points to a greater problem – our struggle in seeing the brightness of the gospel of grace. Why? A similar dynamic. We fail to see the beauty of the gospel because we fail to see its dark backdrop. Failing to see our need of the gospel, we then fail to embrace it as we should.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 3:19-25

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

When chemotherapy is used to treat cancer, it does not give life. In and of itself, what it really brings is death. The chemicals poured into the body destroy healthy tissue as well as the cancer cells. Which is why, during the course of the treatment, the patient begins to feel so much worse. But it is all necessary for the patient's long-term health.

What Paul would have us understand from our text this morning is that the law is much like chemotherapy. It has to make us worse so that Christ can make us better. Two questions are posed by the apostle to his readers. “*Why then the law?*” A reasonable question given everything he has said so far in this letter – pressing from every side in the most forceful fashion that we are justified, made right with God, saved and secure in His presence by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (**READ Galatians 2:15-16**).

In answering the question, Paul presses even harder. He says in v.19 the law “*was added because of transgressions.*” The law's relationship with sin is to expose and reveal it as what it is and even to provoke it in our hearts. That's strong stuff. He then goes on in v.20 speaking to the law's inferiority, passed down indirectly through intermediaries.

But Paul isn't done. He then follows that with another question (**READ Galatians 3:21-22**). The promise of grace is of God. The law is of God. Thus, though drastically different, far from opposing one another, they are intended to work together. The law has a purpose – never to give life, never to save, but rather to point to the One who can, shutting us in such that the grace of God would be seen and embraced as our only hope.

Paul has prompted with these two questions. He then wisely provides two images to clarify and drive the point home. The law is a warden. And the law is a guardian. The law has an intended purpose. We need to recognize what it is and let it do its job.

I. AS A WARDEN

The first image Paul gives is that of a prison warden (**READ Galatians 3:23**).

A) Holding Us Under the Law

The law is a warden, locking us up. We were held under the law. Before faith came, before the light dawned into our hearts and we believed, we were in a dark cell.

1. Held captive

“*Held captive*” – confined, kept in custody. Much as a prisoner would be under the watch of guards. Much as a city would be under siege by an encircling army.

2. Imprisoned

“Imprisoned” – hemmed in, cooped up. Like fish in a net, caught and ensnared.

B) Driving Us to the Savior

We were held under the law. Why? To drive us to the Savior.

1. Unpleasant

(**READ Galatians 3:23**) Obviously, the picture here is not of a pleasant experience. The law and our inability to obey it forcibly shoves our spiritual bankruptcy into our face.

2. But necessary

It’s not pleasant. But it’s necessary. It has a purpose. And it’s to lead us to Jesus.

Illustration:

Paul knew the experience of being “held captive” and “imprisoned” in both the spiritual and the literal sense. The governor of Damascus had tried to keep him in the city which led to his escape through a city wall. Years later, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, held in a Roman garrison, and then – because of a plot to assassinate him – escorted by a formidable detachment of soldiers to Caesarea. Protective custody of sorts.

Application:

Which is what the law is meant to do for us. Not to save us but to hold us captive and imprisoned that we might then run to the Savior. This was true in Israel’s history. The law was meant to show that she had nowhere else to go. The promises regarding God’s provision, the worship picturing the costly means by which they could be saved.

This was true in the unfolding of Israel’s history. And in our own. The law is meant to press down and into us the realization that we have nowhere else to go. We never have. And we never will. That’s its purpose. And we need to let it do its job.

II. AS A GUARDIAN

For the law is a warden. And it is a guardian as well (**READ Galatians 3:24-25**).

A) Holding Us Under the Law

It’s a fascinating image. What does it mean? In the 1st century Roman world...

1. A guide

...a guardian was usually a slave who served as a guide to a boy, getting him to and from school, helping him with his schoolwork and his manners, and watching over his conduct.

2. A disciplinarian

But the guardian was not so much a teacher as a disciplinarian – often harsh to the point of cruelty, usually depicted in ancient drawings with a rod or a cane in their hands.

B) Driving Us to the Savior

Now, again, this is the image Paul gives of the purpose of the law. To what end? Cruelty for cruelty’s sake? No, absolutely not (**READ Galatians 3:24-25**). There’s a parallel here to the image of the warden in terms of an unpleasantness with a purpose.

1. Unpleasant

What, after all, is the message of the law? It expresses the will of God for His people. It tells us what to do and what not to do. It warns us of the consequences, the penalties of disobedience. None of which is entirely pleasant. All of which is absolutely necessary.

2. But necessary

It rebukes and punishes us with an end in mind – that we might turn from our vain, empty, foolish, and futile efforts at being justified by obedience to the law and then hear the pronouncement that we can only be justified through faith. The law is our guardian.

Illustration:

Tough as it is, the law is our guardian. I've just started reading a biography of Martin Luther. The law's function as a guardian reminds me of the description given of one of the schools young Luther attended as a boy ([READ biography quote, p.12](#)):

The methods were said to be strict and brutal, the teachers ignorant and unsympathetic, the entire atmosphere one to charge any boy's mind with thorough dislike and even hatred. To memorize slowly and without interest the rules of Latin grammar from that thousand year-old textbook by Donatus, to be beaten by the assistant for faulty memory as well as for breaks in discipline, to be forced to talk in Latin instead of German...

Application:

Years later Luther wrote in his commentary on Galatians ([READ Luther quote](#)):

The law with its function does contribute to justification – not because it justifies, but because it impels one to the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law; but we show its true function and use, namely, that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ...; for its function and use is not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ...Therefore the principal purpose of the Law in theology is to make men not better but worse; that is, it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring.

Contrary to what we might want to believe, the law was never meant to save us but to point us to the One who can – Jesus. Again, this is what we see in Israel's history. Through the law, she was taught and led, warned and punished, looking and longing for the One Paul describes in v.19 – “*the offspring...to whom the promise had been made.*”

And what was true in Israel's history is true in our own. Some of us here this morning can speak to how God has used His law in your life to show you your need for Him. And that is a work of His grace to open and soften your heart to see. If that's where you are, thank Him from the depths of your heart. If that's not where you are, ask Him to show you, to help you see the reality of your sin, the curse and judgment it brings, and the hope of a Savior He offers. Now that may mean hearing some rough things. But listen. The law has an intended purpose. We need to recognize what that purpose is – not confusing it in any way – and let it do its good, hard, and necessary work in us.

CONCLUSION:

A good thing used in the right way can be of great help. A good thing used in the wrong way can cause great harm. We see that in every area of life. Several months ago I gave my son, Alex, a pocket knife. In doing so, I stressed to him the need to use it with care. “It's a tool, not a toy.” I said that only out of concern for him and a lasting memory of a time when I failed to keep that in mind – a lasting memory and a lasting scar on my finger because of my own failure years ago to use such a tool in the right way.

A good thing used in the wrong way can cause great harm. The law is a good thing. But it needs to be used in the right way. John Stott notes ([READ Stott quote](#)):

Not until the law has bruised and smitten us will we admit our need of the gospel to bind up our wounds. Not until the law has arrested and imprisoned us will we pine for Christ to set us free. Not until the law has condemned and killed us will we call upon Christ for justification and life. Not until the law has driven us to despair of ourselves will we ever believe in Jesus. Not until the law has humbled us even to hell will we turn to the gospel to raise us to heaven.

The good news of the gospel is a message of God's grace saving sinners. But we are not hearing that message if we do not know God's law condemning sinners. The law has an intended purpose. We need to recognize what that purpose is. And then let it do its job.

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