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Breathing the Fresh Air of Liberty in Jesus Christ

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

“God’s Law Drives us to His Promise”

November 10, 2013

Sermon Text: Galatians 3:19-20

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29

Introduction-

Fundamentally, man approaches his relationship with God through the doings of his own hands. The Bible calls this the “works of the Law.” We have this bent in us. People either deny

that God exists entirely, or they fashion him into some idol of their own making. And idols always come with a set of terms for making the idol god happy with the idolater. Man by nature is an idolater. He refuses to acknowledge the living and true God (Romans 1) or give Him thanks. What he does instead is create the false god with his own mind and then writes his own theology which is always some kind of works/sacrifice system that is said to appease the idol god.

Now that makes us think initially of outright pagan religions in some backward culture – but of course the thing is rampant all around us. Many people who profess to worship the Christian God have in fact so tweaked Him that he is an entirely different deity, and the religion they pursue is one of a false gospel of “being a good person and all is well.” Such systems are pronounced anathema by Paul, and it is his purpose here in Galatians to set us straight, reminding us that God’s only way of making us righteous is by HIS working through Christ alone.

This Way is what Paul is calling the Promise, and it is quite the opposite of the Law. It all sounds so simple. Faith alone in Christ alone. Not by works. And yet ingrained in man is business of self-made righteousness. The sinner would rather whip himself bloody than trust in Christ.

This tendency remains in us as long as our sinful flesh remains. And we must constantly guard against it. What Paul is about to say here in 3:19-29 refers to the Mosaic Law, but it applies directly to us because we are tempted to “do” some kind of law ourselves. This is why Paul’s statement in 2:20 is so important:

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

By faith. By faith. Not only at the beginning when we first believed in Christ, but every moment of every day we relate to God now by faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice for us. It is not a performance system.

John 1:16-17 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (17) For the law was given

through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Alright then, let’s see what more Paul has to teach us about Promise in contrast to the Law. We will only get through the first two or three verses today, but here is this entire section:

Galatians 3:19-29 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. (20) Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. (21) Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. (22) But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (23) Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. (24) So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. (25) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, (26) for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (27) For as many of you as

were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Why the Law Then?

Now recall that Paul had reminded us that the Promise to Abraham was given 430 years before the Law came at Mt. Sinai. And Abraham was *counted righteous* simply because he believed God's promise to bless him and his Seed. Further, that all the nations would be blessed in this Seed (who is Christ). There would be a land (the new creation) and a new humanity. These blessings are the blessings which we receive in Christ. Christ and His salvation is what God promised. Sometimes the Holy Spirit in us is referred to as the Promise because through Him our union with Christ and regeneration, among other aspects of the blessing, are effected.

So then, Abraham was not justified by works of the Law. He wasn't even circumcised yet when he was counted righteous (as we read in Romans 4). The Promise is superior to the Law for many reasons, one of which was that it came over 4 centuries before! Paul will now show us more reasons why

the Promise is God's plan for redemption and is superior to the Law.

Galatians 3:19-20 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. (20) Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Why the Law then? If it is by faith alone, by the Promise made by God to bless Abraham that we are made righteous, why did God give the Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai? Here is the answer:

The Law was given as an addition, and it was added to deal with sin in at least two ways.

The Law did not and does not serve as a remedy for the curse sin has brought upon man. But it does function, and it was given, because of the existence of sin. What does it do? At least three things:

1. It serves as a restrainer of sin. In this sense it is like a criminal code that threatens those who violate it with penalties and sanctions. Man is wicked and he needs to be made to fear the consequences of his sin.

2. The law convicts sinners of their sin and thus of their guilt before God.

3. The Law points the sinner to Christ.

Our inheritance (vs 18) comes by way of Promise. God's promise, which means – God's doing. Not ours.

So we see here in vs 19 this very thing – *the law was added because of sin*. It's function is connected with sin. But when the Seed came (the offspring, that is, Christ), there was a new game in town! Grace! A new covenant which is of faith, not works. Listen to Luther as I simply cannot say it nearly as well as him. I was just going to quote Luther briefly but I find over and over in reading him that his explanation is so clear that I keep saying "oh, well, I better include this next paragraph too. They MUST hear this!" So here we go:

All things differ. Let everything serve its unique purpose. Let the sun shine by day, the moon and the stars by night. Let the sea furnish fish, the earth grain, the woods trees, etc. Let the Law also serve its unique purpose. **It must not step out of character and take the place of anything else.** What is the function of the Law? "Transgression," answers the Apostle.

The Law has a twofold purpose. One purpose is **civil**. God has ordained civil

laws to punish crime. Every law is given to restrain sin. Does it not then make men righteous? No. In refraining from murder, adultery, theft, or other sins, I do so under compulsion because I fear the jail, the noose, the electric chair. These restrain me as iron bars restrain a lion and a bear. Otherwise they would tear everything to pieces. Such forceful restraint cannot be regarded as righteousness, rather as an indication of unrighteousness. As a wild beast is tied to keep it from running amuck, so the Law bridles mad and furious man to keep him from running wild. The need for restraint shows plainly enough that those who need the Law are not righteous, but wicked men who are fit to be tied. No, the Law does not justify. The first purpose of the Law, accordingly, is to restrain the wicked.

The devil gets people into all kinds of scrapes. Therefore God instituted governments, parents, laws, restrictions, and civil ordinances. At least they help to tie the devil's hands so that he does not rage up and down the earth. This civil restraint by the Law is intended by God for the preservation of all things, particularly for the good of the Gospel that it should not be hindered too much by the tumult of the wicked.

But Paul is not now treating of this civil use and function of the Law. **The**

second purpose of the Law is spiritual and divine. Paul describes this spiritual purpose of the Law in the words, "Because of transgressions," i.e., to reveal to a person his sin, blindness, misery, his ignorance, hatred, and contempt of God, his death, hell, and condemnation.

This is the principal purpose of the Law and its most valuable contribution. As long as a person is not a murderer, adulterer, thief, he would swear that he is righteous. How is God going to humble such a person except by the Law? The Law is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of God's wrath to bring down the proud and shameless hypocrites.

When the Law was instituted on Mount Sinai it was accompanied by lightning, by storms, by the sound of trumpets, to tear to pieces that monster called self-righteousness. As long as a person thinks he is right he is going to be incomprehensibly proud and presumptuous. He is going to hate God, despise His grace and mercy, and ignore the promises in Christ. The Gospel of the free forgiveness of sins through Christ will never appeal to the self-righteous. This monster of self-righteousness, this stiff-necked beast, needs a big axe. And that is what the Law is, a big axe. Accordingly, the proper use and function of the Law is

to threaten until the conscience is scared stiff.

The awful spectacle at Mount Sinai portrayed the proper use of the Law. When the children of Israel came out of Egypt a feeling of singular holiness possessed them. **They boasted:** "We are the people of God. All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." (Ex. 19:8) This feeling of holiness was heightened when Moses ordered them to wash their clothes, to refrain from their wives, and to prepare themselves all around.

The third day came and Moses led the people out of their tents to the foot of the mountain into the presence of the Lord. What happened? When the children of Israel saw the whole mountain burning and smoking, the black clouds rent by fierce lightning flashing up and down in the inky darkness, when they heard the sound of the trumpet blowing louder and longer, shattered by the roll of thunder, they were so frightened that they begged Moses: "Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Ex. 20:19.)

I ask you, what good did their scrubbing, their snow-white clothes, and their continence do them? No good at all. Not a single one could stand in the presence of the glorious Lord. Stricken by the terror of God,

they fled back into their tents, as if the devil were after them. The Law is meant to produce the same effect today which it produced at Mount Sinai long ago.

I want to encourage all who fear God, especially those who intend to become ministers of the Gospel, to **learn from the Apostle the proper use of the Law**. I fear that after our time the right handling of the Law will become a lost art. Even now, although we continually explain the separate functions of the Law and the Gospel, we have those among us who do not understand how the Law should be used. What will it be like when we are dead and gone?

We want it understood that we do not reject the Law as our opponents claim. On the contrary, we uphold the Law. We say the Law is good if it is used for the purposes for which it was designed, to check civil transgression, and to magnify spiritual transgressions. The Law is also a light like the Gospel. But instead of revealing the grace of God, righteousness, and life, the Law brings sin, death, and the wrath of God to light. **This is the business of the Law, and here the business of the Law ends, and should go no further.**

The business of the Gospel, on the other hand, is to quicken, to comfort, to raise the fallen. The Gospel carries the news that God for Christ's sake is

merciful to the most unworthy sinners, if they will only believe that Christ by His death has delivered them from sin and everlasting death unto grace, forgiveness, and everlasting life. By keeping in mind the difference between the Law and the Gospel we let each perform its special task.

Of this difference between the Law and the Gospel nothing can be discovered in the writings of the monks or scholastics, nor for that matter in the writings of the ancient fathers. Augustine understood the difference somewhat. Jerome and others knew nothing of it. The silence in the Church concerning the difference between the Law and the Gospel has resulted in untold harm. Unless a sharp distinction is maintained between the purpose and function of the Law and the Gospel, the Christian doctrine cannot be kept free from error.

[The Law was given so that] transgressions might be recognized as such and thus increased. When sin, death, and the wrath of God are revealed to a person by the Law, he grows impatient, complains against God, and rebels. Before that he was a very holy man; he worshipped and praised God; he bowed his knees before God and gave thanks, like the Pharisee. But now that sin and death are revealed to him by the Law he

wishes there were no God. The Law inspires hatred of God. **Thus sin is not only revealed by the Law; sin is actually increased and magnified by the Law.**

The Law is a mirror to show a person what he is like, a sinner who is guilty of death, and worthy of everlasting punishment. What is this bruising and beating by the hand of the Law to accomplish? This,-- that we may find the way to grace. The Law is an usher to lead the way to grace. God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the afflicted. It is His nature to exalt the humble, to comfort the sorrowing, to heal the broken-hearted, to justify the sinners, and to save the condemned. The fatuous idea that a person can be holy by himself denies God the pleasure of saving sinners.

God must therefore first take the sledge-hammer of the Law in His fists and smash the beast of self-righteousness and its brood of self-confidence, self-wisdom, self-righteousness, and self-help. When the conscience has been thoroughly frightened by the Law it welcomes the Gospel of grace with its message of a Savior who came into the world, not to break the bruised reed, nor to quench the smoking flax, but to preach glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, and to grant forgiveness of sins to all the captives.

Man's folly, however, is so prodigious that instead of embracing the message of grace with its guarantee of the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake, **man finds himself more laws to satisfy his conscience.** "If I live," says he, "I will mend my life. I will do this, I will do that."

Man, if you don't do the very opposite, if you don't send Moses with the Law back to Mount Sinai and take the hand of Christ, pierced for your sins, you will never be saved.

When the Law drives you to the point of despair, let it drive you a little farther, let it drive you straight into the arms of Jesus who says: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Till the seed should come to whom the promise was made (vs 19). The Law is not to have its say indefinitely. We must know how long the Law is to put in its licks. If it hammers away too long, no person would and could be saved. **The Law has a boundary beyond which it must not go.** How long ought the Law to hold sway? "Till the seed should come to whom the promise was made." That may be taken literally to mean until the time of the Gospel. "From the days of John the Baptist," says Jesus, "until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence,

and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John." (Matthew 11:12, 13.) When Christ came the Law and the ceremonies of Moses ceased.

Spiritually, it means that the Law is not to operate on a person after he has been humbled and frightened by the exposure of his sins and the wrath of God. We must then say to the Law:

"Mister Law, lay off him. He has had enough. You scared him good and proper." Now it is the Gospel's turn. Now let Christ with His gracious lips talk to him of better things, grace, peace, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

Luther, Martin (2011-03-24). Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (Kindle Locations 1626-1694). . Kindle Edition.

Put in Place by an Intermediary

So what is Paul's point when he speaks of this "intermediary" or "mediator"? No one really knows what he meant by "through angels." Perhaps angels were involved in giving the law to Moses there on Sinai, we don't know. We do know that the intermediary he means is Moses. We do have this:

Acts 7:52-53 Which of the prophets did your fathers not

persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, (53) you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Hebrews 2:2-3 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, (3) how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,

Deuteronomy 5:4-5 The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, (5) while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain.

But God is One

Now verse 20 can be the real puzzle. It obviously furthers the thought of verse 19 because Paul is still talking about the intermediary-

Galatians 3:20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

The commentators I checked have all apparently heard the same tongue in cheek rumor that there are 430 interpretations of verse 20! But I do think we can sort it out.

Remember way back at the beginning of this epistle? –

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle--not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead--

Galatians 1:11-12 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. (12) For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In those statements, Paul was showing that the gospel is truth. That it is superior to anything else they are hearing. Why? Because it was given directly by God to Paul. No human mediator or agency. Christ revealed it to him.

So now here in 3:19 Paul points out that the Law was given to man through angels to Moses, then to the people.

There was more than “one” involved in the giving of the law, and standing between man and God. BUT the Promise is different. ONLY God was involved. Directly to Abraham he spoke. And I suggest that is what Paul means here – that only God spoke the promise. Only God gave the gospel – in His Son. Christ is said to be the only Mediator between God and man, but the difference here is that Christ IS God! Remember again-

Hebrews 2:2-3 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, (3) how shall we escape if we neglect **such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord,** and it was attested to us by those who heard,

See? It is the same thing. Why is the gospel such a great salvation? Well, it is shown to be because the Lord Himself came down to give it to us and to effect it. In the gospel He has drawn near, unlike the Law.

The Law and the Gospel, or the Law and the Promise. Two very, very different covenants. The one speaks death and condemnation. The other gives grace and life. One is reliant upon our own works, the other is

through simple faith and trust in the work Christ has already done.

Let's close off with this final word from Martin Luther:

What do you suppose would have happened if the Law had been given without a mediator and the people had been denied the services of a go-between? The people would have perished, or in case they had escaped they would have required the services of another mediator to preserve them alive and to keep the Law in force.

Moses came along and he was made the mediator. He covered his face with a veil. But that is as much as he could do. He could not deliver men's consciences from the terror of the Law. The sinner needs a better mediator. That better mediator is Jesus Christ.

He does not change the voice of the Law, nor does He hide the Law with a veil. He takes the full blast of the wrath of the Law and fulfills its demands most meticulously. Of this better Mediator Paul says: "A mediator is not a mediator of one." We are the offending party; God is the party offended. The offense is of such a nature that God cannot pardon it. Neither can we render adequate satisfaction for our offenses. There is discord between God and us.

Could not God revoke His Law? No. How about running away from God? It cannot be done. It took Christ to come between us and God and to reconcile God to us. How did Christ do it? "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." (Col. 2:14.) This

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