

“The Promise Superior to the Law”
Galatians 3:15-18
(Preached at Trinity, January 6, 2013)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Paul is continuing to defend the Gospel from those who would pervert it by adding human works. The doctrine of justification by faith alone was under attack so Paul is building his case for the Gospel by setting forth clear arguments. Paul had a keen mind, a brilliant intellect, and a solid command of the Scriptures. He systematically sets forth his defense of the faith—that salvation rests upon Christ alone, apart from works of the Law.
 - A. Paul’s His first argument was simply to call these Christians to examine their own experience of salvation.

He reminds them of the Gospel delivered to them – Christ crucified was displayed before them. By faith alone they received Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit. It was all because of God’s grace apart from works of the Law.
Verse 1 - "before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?"
 - B. Then Paul began to give his specific arguments from Scripture. He begins by appealing to the faith of Abraham.
 - C. In the midst of this argument Paul steps aside to address the issue of the Law more particularly. Not only is it impossible for a person to be justified by his works. He will be cursed if he tries.
Galatians 3:10 NAU - "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."
2. This morning we’ll look at Paul’s next argument. Paul looks at it from the perspective of God’s covenant.
3. In this portion of God’s Word we are mining the depths of theology. The Bible contains both doctrine and principles for living. Doctrine has fallen upon hard times. Most church members have little understanding of the great doctrines of the faith. Many dismiss the issue declaring that doctrine divides. We just need to focus upon Jesus and living the Christian life.
 - A. Jesus cannot be known apart from doctrine.
 - B. And right behavior cannot come apart from sound doctrine.

We see this demonstrated in the NT Epistles. Doctrinal portions are often followed by practical application.
Rom.1-11 contains doctrine and then Paul applies the doctrine in chapters 12-16. Here in Galatians Chapters 1-4 contain strong doctrine and then chapters 5-6 contain practical application.
 - C. Doctrine is not just for Pastors to study. Paul wrote this to the church—to the people in the pew.

4. Before we begin I want us to notice the graciousness of Paul.
- A. In **Verse 1** Paul refers to them as foolish men who were under the influence of the black magic of sorcery.
Galatians 3:1 NAU - "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you"
 - B. In **Chapter 1** he accused them of desertion
Galatians 1:6 NAU - "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel"
 - C. In **Chapter 1** he warned them of the fearful danger of tampering with the Gospel.
Galatians 1:9 NAU - "if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"
 - D. But here in **Verse 15** he calls them "brothers." In spite of his harsh language, he still considered them to be brothers in Christ and so he speaks to them with love and graciousness. We must teach sound doctrine, but doctrine must always be spoken with love and humility.
Ephesians 4:12-15 NAU - "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ,"
5. Paul's argument here in **Verses 15-18** is the priority of faith over the Law. Perhaps the Judaizers were agreeing with Paul that Abraham's faith was important. They weren't denying that we must look to Christ by faith. The heart of their teaching was we must trust Christ to begin our salvation but then we must supplement our faith with works of the Law—their gospel was faith *plus* works. Paul's argument is we are saved through faith in Christ ALONE.
6. Perhaps they were also using Abraham as the basis of their argument—that God *started* His plan with Abraham but then added the Law 430 years later. They argued that this surely proved that the basis of our salvation was the faith of Abraham *plus* obedience to the works of the Law. God gave the promise first which must be received by faith, and then He added the Law which must be obeyed as our part in redemption.
- A. This is still the great debate today. Is salvation a work of God alone completely apart from our work? Is it a monergistic work?
 - B. Or is salvation a synergistic work—that is, God does His part and we must do our part?
 - C. You may have heard well meaning pastors say, "God has done all that He can do. He has sent His Son. Jesus died on the cross. Now you must do your part. You must believe. But this makes our faith an act of merit.
 - D. It is much more subtle than these Galatian Judaizers but the issue is the same.
7. There are multitudes who call themselves Christians who are trusting in their good works to obtain God's favor.

8. This passage of **Verses 15-18** is Paul's counterargument to the Judaizers line of reasoning. Paul rejects their claim that the Law was given as an addition to God's requirement for our redemption from sin. In **Verses 19-25** Paul will explain *why* the Law was given which we'll look at next time.
- But this morning I want to set before you the relationship of God's promise in the Gospel to the giving of the Law.
- God gave the promise to Abraham and then later gave the Law through Moses. Was the promise changed by the Law?
- I. Paul begins with the human argument
- A. Paul uses the example of a last will and testament
- Galatians 3:15 NAU** - "Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it."
1. The word διαθήκη is translated "covenant" but can also refer to a testament or will
- Hebrews 9:17 NAS** - "For a covenant is valid *only* when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives."
2. Paul uses the human last will and testament as an example of the fixed and unchanging and unalterable nature of God's promise.
 3. While a man is alive he can redo his will. He can change it but after he has died it cannot be changed. It must be carried out fully.
 4. Many heirs might wish to change it. They might consider it unjust or unfair, but they cannot annul it or change it.
- B. Did not God make a covenant promise to Abraham and his seed?
1. Was it not reaffirmed to Isaac, to Jacob?
 2. Did not Abraham believe and it was counted to him as righteousness?
 3. The covenant could not change with the death of Abraham
- The Law did not mean a change or annulment of the promise – **V. 17**
- II. What is the relationship between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant?
- A. All of God's covenants are flowing forth from the eternal covenant of redemption
1. LBC Chapter 7:3 – "This covenant (the covenant of grace) is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect."
 2. God decreed that all of humanity would come under one of two covenant heads, Adam or Christ.
 3. God looked upon the fallen race of humanity under the curse of Adam's sin and determined to deliver a multitude through His Son.
- B. God's is working out His eternal covenant in history. All of history should be viewed as God carrying out His redemptive purpose.
1. He first revealed the Gospel after Adam and Eve fell into sin.
- Genesis 3:15 NAS** - "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."

2. He later revealed His promise of a Redeemer to Abraham
Galatians 3:16 NAU - "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ."
 - a. Abraham was saved through belief in this promise.
Galatians 3:6 NAS - "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."
 - b. This goes back to the original covenant revealed in **Genesis 3**
 Every other person who has ever been saved has been saved in this same manner—by believing in the promised Seed, Jesus Christ.
Galatians 3:7-9 NAU - "Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer."
 - c. All of the promises of God are fulfilled in Christ
Galatians 3:16 NAU - "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ."
 3. And then 430 years later God made another covenant with His people through Moses. This covenant too pointed to Christ
- C. The Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenants are not covenants of a different type. They are both the outworking of God's eternal purpose. But they are also infinitely different.
1. They were different in that the Abrahamic Covenant contained no obligation. In **Verses 17-18** Paul repeatedly repeats the word "promise." God's covenant to Abraham was purely a covenant of unconditional promise with no stipulations. There were no threats or penalties. Circumcision was added later as a sign but not as a stipulation to the promise.
 2. The Mosaic Covenant, on the other hand, imposed obligations upon Israel and contained penalties.
 In this sense it is likened to the covenant of works. Only, it cannot promise life because all have broken it. It is a covenant that makes demands and carries a curse because no one can keep it.
Galatians 3:10 NAS - "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."
 3. Paul says in **Verse 18** that if God's Covenant is based on works it ceases to be a covenant of promise. The Law demands, "Do this" but the promise demands, "Accept this."
 If it is works it cannot be promise.

- D. But we must also understand that all of God's covenants are covenants of grace. They are covenants of God's condescension and mercy upon sinful people
1. Abraham was a sinner like every other man but God chose him and chose to raise up His seed through him.
God's promise through Abraham was a promise of grace and faith. Abraham was counted as righteous by his faith in God's promise
 2. So what about the Mosaic Covenant and the giving of the Law?
It too was ultimately a Covenant of grace. In both covenants the only way to be accepted by God was by trusting Him for His grace and believing in His promise of the Gospel.

Conclusion:

1. We are saved by promise, not by obligation. Does our obedience mean nothing? Our obedience does not earn God's favor. We are accepted only through Christ.
2. But God's salvation also brings about a wonderful transformation in our lives. While God's covenant to Abraham was purely a covenant of promise and grace, Abraham's faith was a life of faith, not a single act of faith.
Listen to James on Abraham's justification:
James 2:17-24 NAU - "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. ¹⁸ But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."
3. Paul makes it clear that Abraham was justified by faith alone, but his faith was not void of obedience.
Genesis 22:16-18 NAU - "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."
4. God would later affirm the covenant to Isaac:
Genesis 26:4-5 NAU - "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵ because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws."
5. Abraham's obedience was an obedience of faith. He was justified by faith alone.
Salvation does depend upon our works. But our works are not something we do in order to earn salvation. Our works are simply the fruit of a life lived by faith. The Law was given to outline what a life of faith looks like.
6. Upon what are you trusting for salvation? Are you hoping your good works will be sufficient? They will not! We are saved through faith in Christ alone. The Law is holy, just, and good, but it does not teach legalism. It points us to Christ alone.

You must set your hope upon Him.