

Then What Is the LAW Good For? Romans 4:13-15, Galatians 3:21-27

I know that you may find this hard to believe but after three weeks of long and heavy sermons, this Sunday's message will be rather short, focusing on just one final question that Paul needs to deal with before moving onto more joyous subjects: **If obeying the Law can't make anyone righteous, then why did God give us the Law? What is the Law good for?**

So let's begin.

Through almost four chapters of his Romans letter, Paul has very carefully explained in great detail why there is no one righteous; no one who could earn his way to heaven by keeping the law. As he wrote...

For "no human being will be justified in God's sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for **through the law comes the knowledge of sin.** (Romans 3:20)

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed ...
the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Romans 3:21-22)

For there is no distinction, **since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift,** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
(Romans 3:23-25)

This seems very straightforward, you either accept God's gift of imputed righteousness by faith, or you reject God's gift and continue your attempts to live righteously enough to earn heaven. But, the Bible doesn't really give you any hope at all if you make the latter choice, as the gospel of John points out: *you either believe in Jesus and are not condemned or you do not believe in Jesus and are condemned already* (John 3:18).

Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.
(Romans 4:3)

Then next, Paul very carefully illustrates this truth with **Abraham, Israel's founder and national hero, who contrary to their legends, was himself an ungodly man needing God's righteousness "reckoned" to him; credited to his account.**

- This crediting of righteousness happened some 14 years before Abraham took on circumcision—the national sign of Israel and also a “work”—signaling their covenant with God, which some believed was their guarantee of salvation.
- And this crediting of righteousness happened some 424 years before God ever gave the Law through Moses.

So now you can almost see Paul's Jewish audience throwing their hands up in the air and exclaiming...

If all that the Law does is teach me that I am a hopeless sinner, exposed to God's wrath, and needing to have God's righteousness reckoned to me as a gift...then why did He give us the law in the first place?

To which Paul answers: “PRECISELY!”

Actually his reply to their supposed question is a little more cryptic than that. I truly believe that Paul was getting so excited as he described the quality of Abraham's faith against all hope, that he gives just this single somewhat vague answer to their question.

For the law brings wrath;
but where there is no law,
neither is there violation.

Romans 4:15

Now what exactly Paul meant, he doesn't further explain here; he just goes on talking about Abraham's faith. But thankfully he does return to this question later in this letter (chapter 7), and this is not the only letter in which Paul discusses the purpose of the Law. **The Galatian Church** was largely a young Gentile Christian community who were getting confused by hypocrites following after Paul and intentionally contradicting him by telling these Gentile believers that their only hope of being saved by faith in Jesus, would come after they were also circumcised and kept the kosher laws (in other words, converted to Judaism). So Paul had to write this young church a corrective letter, which he begins in his gentle fatherly fashion: “*you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?!*” (Galatians 3). And from there he goes on to carefully explain the purpose of the law:

**the law was our disciplinarian
to lead us to Christ,**
so that we might be justified by faith.
Galatians 3:24 (*my paraphrase*)

Other translations use the word "school master," or "tutor," but I think that "disciplinarian" is also appropriate for the following reasons:

1. As the book of Romans had earlier noted, the first function of the Law was to teach us what sin actually is.
2. And it was to help restrain our sinning--make us behave--by warning us of the consequences. As Proverbs warns us: *Those who keep the commandment will live; those who are heedless of their ways will die (19:16).*
3. The Law actually draws a mental line in front of me, indicating that if I cross over this line I am a sinner.
4. So, as Paul concluded in his letter to the Galatians, if you were a smart student of the Law you would realize that your failure to keep the law makes you a sinner--incapable of earning righteousness--and this should send you looking for God's grace.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Romans

For the law brings
[knowledge of God's] wrath;
**but where there is no law,
neither is there [knowledge] of
violation.** Romans 4:15

I stuck a few more words in here to clarify what Paul meant when he declared *where there is no law, neither is there violation.*

Yes, of course, people were still sinners before the law was given, still dying, still needing God's grace and imputed righteousness--just like Abraham. But no one could be convinced or convicted of his/her sin until sin was defined. And, this is what the Law does; it defines for me what qualifies as sin. In defining sin, it draws a line. **And when I consciously "cross that line"** (*which is the literal meaning of the Greek word translated here as "violation" and in other places as "transgression," or as "trespassing"*), **it proves to me that I am guilty and deserving of God's wrath.**

Thus the knowing the Law turns my ignorant sin into conscious violation (a deliberate trespass) of God's standards—which I also know is deserving of God's wrath. But where there is no published law, there can be no breach of the Law; "*no violation,*" "*no wrath*" (4:15).

So, if God had not set standards we would still be sinners, having fallen short of God's glory, but also morally autonomous, unable to be challenged in our sins. To quote Dostoyevsky: *if there is no god, all things are permissible.*

1. By setting standards God taught us what was sin while also working to restrain our sin.
2. And in our conscious violation of, or failure to meet, those standards we should have learned that we are sinners deserving God's wrath;
3. And this should send us—just like David—looking for mercy, looking for grace.

Have mercy on me, O God ...
blot out my transgressions....

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment..

Psalm 51:1-4

While Philip is on vacation, let me see if I can illustrate this idea of what Paul meant by *where there is no law, neither is there violation*, by telling a tale on the two of us from just this last Fall.

Wanting to get one more canoe trip in before the cold dark winter had closed over us, Philip and I had loaded our canoes on a trailer and headed over to the James River. We found a good place to put in at the village of Arcadia and then turned and drove down Solitude Road, which parallels the river on this side, looking for a possible takeout spot. As the road grew narrower and less traveled, we even passed by a wrecked trailer home on the side of the road with – in very large letters--the words "**Turn around**" spray painted on its side. Not knowing whether this was a helpful offer or a warning, we continued on down the road until we came to a sign which declared "**End of State Maintenance,**" beyond which, a tractor trail headed promisingly down the hill towards the river. Not being sure we could turn around at the end, we wisely parked our vehicles by the sign and walked on down the trail. In a short while we came to a cattle gate opening onto a flat cow pasture right beside the river--things looked

promising. But after further investigation we decided this would not be a good takeout and strolled back up to our cars where we found our vehicles blocked in by an old pickup truck, with an equally old and grumpy farmer waiting for us—let’s call him Brown—holding thankfully not a shotgun but a cane and asking quite pointedly what we were doing walking on his land. Identifying ourselves as two harmless but perhaps foolish pastors, one Baptist, one Presbyterian--hoping we might touch upon one of his preferences--we assured Brown we meant no harm and had merely walked down for a “looksee.” **We had not known we were trespassing.** Somewhat calmed down after having checked our identification Brown asked if we hadn’t seen the sign indicating this as private land; he was pointing at the End of State Maintenance sign. Again we confessed our ignorance and after a bit more, now polite, conversation, he moved his truck and we went in search of the legal takeout spot that he indicated was on the other side of the river (Alpine). We never did get our canoes in the water that day.

Now maybe, because I’m not from around these parts, I did not know that an “End of State Maintenance” sign meant “private land: no trespassing;” (I still don’t think it does). So when Philip and I ignorantly walked onto Farmer Brown’s property we were not intentionally trespassing. Had Farmer Brown simply posted a \$2 **Private Property, NO Trespassing** sign, we would have turned around right there and not crossed his line. But if we had seen such a sign and continued walking, it would certainly have changed our intentions, our culpability—and perhaps even the consequences.

Now here is an even better illustration. Everyone who has been raised right knows that it is just WRONG to drop garbage from your hand or throw it out of your car window onto the road side (*I make exceptions for apple cores and peach pits...that’s not littering, that’s recycling*). So to see a person in the act of littering, automatically tells you something about their character, their attitude, possibly even their education. Yet little can be done to stop these actions until the state posts “Do Not Litter” signs. Notice, that with just the posting of the law, while the action has not changed, the person’s intention behind the act has; what might have formerly been considered an ignorant sin is now a conscious violation, a transgression of the law and eligible for the appropriate punishment.

Did the posting of the Law thus cause me to sin? No. But it did teach me what sin was and hold me accountable for my actions. And yet, in a strange way—because of my sinful, bent nature--posting the law might actually incite me to further breaking of the law; as Paul explains later in this letter.

What then should we say? That the law is sin?
By no means! If it had not been for the law,
I would not have known sin. I would not have known
what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall
not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the
commandment, produced in me all kinds of
covetousness.

Romans 7:7-8

That's what the law is good for: educating ignorant sinful people so that what they do becomes willful violation, which proves to me that I am guilty, deserving of God's wrath, and thus desperately in need of God's gifted righteousness—just like Abraham, just like David, just like everyone else ever born.

Back in Galatians, Paul thus concludes that the Law is not at all opposed to, and certainly does not undo, the promises of God (which came before). And then he makes this most astounding statement:

**For if a law had been given
that could make [us] alive,
then righteousness would
indeed come through the law.**

Galatians 3:21

Think about that for a moment.... **If God could have devised a law by which we could earn righteousness before Him, then He would have. And that is what all of us would have to obey in order to be considered righteous before Him.**

But since all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God ...
and the wages of our sin is death ...
we are now justified by his grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus
... effective through faith. (Romans 3:23-25)

And aren't you very glad for this?

Let's pray.