

0324

Love and the law

Galatians 5:1-15

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Text

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

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Prayer

Introduction

Love and the law.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is approached by a man who was an expert of the Old Testament law.

He asks:

³⁶ **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”** ³⁷ **And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Jesus looks at the entirety of the Old Testament law as falling into one of those two categories: love for God, or love for people.

Bridge

We’ve talked a lot about the law in our study of Galatians.

The point is never that the law was inherently bad, but when Christ came, men distorted the law by adding it onto the gospel.

And in that, the law brought slavery, because when people wanted to look to the law for their salvation, we were unable to follow it and we could not be saved by it.

Yet in today’s passage, after Paul has spoken at great length about the ineffectiveness of the law, he’ll say in verse 14: **For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

How can we fulfill the law if we don’t have to follow it?

That’s the question we’ll answer from our text this morning.

Because in seeing the answer to that question, we once again are pointed to the freedom which is found in Christ and to what living a life for Jesus truly looks like.

And we'll look at our passage in three parts.

Thesis

A law that can't save, the grace that saves, and the love that fulfills the law.
Or if we wanted to simplify it further: law, grace, and love.

The main idea of this passage is that: we are to love others because we have a savior who loves us when we were unlovable.

A law that can't save

I'm not going to repeat everything we talked about last week on the law. I did want to at least have this fresh in our minds today as we move forward in the passage and see Paul progressing from law, to grace, to love.

That there's a flow to his argument. Galatians is not written as a bunch of unrelated ideas.

Beginning in verse 2:

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

Why will Christ be no advantage to you?

Because we cannot selectively pick and choose aspects of the law to follow.

If you want to be saved by the law, then you need to follow all of the law. The issue is that we sin and we can't achieve that on our own, because we're sinful.

I've pointed this out before, but it bears repeating. If the law cannot save, then why did God give the law in the first place? Several reasons.

God gave it so we could be aware of our sin and need for grace.
He gave it in order to set the Israelites apart as a chosen nation, and the law was one of the things that made them distinct.
He gave the law knowing that a savior was coming who would perfectly fulfill the law.
Lastly, he gave it because it was good. The law in itself was not bad. It just couldn't save a sinful person by itself.

Illustration - the king and the carrot

It was always faith that mattered. Love for God.

Because the failure of trying to think you can be good enough to earn God is that it actually keeps you from ever actually doing anything for God.

Charles Spurgeon was a great 19th century British preacher. He makes this observation¹. If you feel like you have to follow rules, then you're not following those for God, you're following them for yourself.

If you think you have to behave a certain way to be forgiven, then you're not behaving the way you behave because you love God, it's because you love yourself.

And so Spurgeon uses this illustration:

"Once upon a time there was a king who ruled over everything in a land. One day there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. He took it to his king and said, "My lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as he turned to go, the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I want to give a plot of land to you freely as a gift, so you can

¹ Timothy J. Keller, "The freedom of hope." 22 March 1998. [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#) (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

garden it all.” The gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard all this, and he said, “My! If that is what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better?” The next day the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses, and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred or ever will; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart and said, “Thank you,” and took the horse and simply dismissed him.

The nobleman was perplexed, so the king said, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse.”

Do you see? The noble didn’t make an offering to the king because he loved or wanted to honor the king, he did it because he thought it would help himself.

When a person wants to truly in the law, there’s no love for God in that, it’s love for yourself.

And so when you recognize God for who he is, and love God for who he is, and know the grace that God offers to you, that is what frees you to live for God because of its intrinsic value and goodness.

We come to our second point.

The grace that saves

Paul points to the ineffectiveness of the law so that he can point to the effectiveness of the gospel.

Verse 5:

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

Righteousness cannot come from our obedience to the law, because we are sinful. But through faith in the gospel, the righteousness of Christ is given to us as if it were our own.

In this verse, Paul links together the idea of faith and the Holy Spirit.

You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have faith without the Spirit. And you cannot have the Spirit without faith.

It's a new life. That's why Jesus calls it being "born again" in the Gospel of John.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says:

if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Earlier in Galatians, Paul had said:

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

And so when a person truly understands the gospel and believes, your life can never be the same.

When you've gone from the slavery of sin, and the slavery of trying to earn your way to God, to know that there is freedom and grace in Christ, your life cannot be the same.

I've read a few books by people who have escaped from North Korea and found freedom. Incredible stories. We have people who will risk their lives to come to America for freedom. Some have escaped tyranny, persecution, threats to their lives. And then you come to a place that's free. Your life can't be the same. Everything is different.

Gospel

So I ask: do you know this freedom? Do you know this life that Jesus gives?

Because the bad news is that we cannot make ourselves right with God, but the good news is that we have a savior who has reconciled us to the Father.

The bad news is that we sin, but the good news is that the gospel is powerful enough to change the human heart because we have a savior who brings newness and life.

Verse 6:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

So verse 5 is talking about the faith and Spiritual transformation of the gospel. Verse 6 is foreshadowing what Paul will talk about later in the passage. How the sign of true faith is love.

I return to the question from the beginning of our time. How can you fulfill the law if you don't have to follow it?

Is Paul here contradicting himself?

It all goes back to the transformative impact of true faith in the gospel. How we cannot be the same. That if we truly do love God, it impacts how we love people.

So it's not that love is something we do that is earning our salvation.

Rather, love is meant to be evidence of true faith.

Lord willing, next week, we'll be talking about the fruit of the Spirit. And the point of that passage is that when a person has faith in the gospel, it impacts us, it changes us, we bear fruit which reflects what we believe.

So this mid section is revolving around the gospel. Last week, we looked at verses 1-9. I'm now actually going to move to verse 10.

And so Paul is been speaking of people trying to earn grace by the law, but we also see his confidence in the Lord that these people will realize that the error of their ways.

¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

As he's continued to do elsewhere, here he addresses the Galatians as people who are believers in the gospel who have been led astray. He expresses his optimism in the power of God to work in their lives. Paul will reiterate his own trust in the gospel. Verses 11-12:

**But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.
¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!**

That's a verse that can be confusing at first glance. But basically, there was a rumor that people had spread which was that Paul himself was still advocating for circumcision. His name had weight and so people were trying to put words in Paul's mouth and say he agreed with their view.

He didn't. And it's again pointing us to the gospel.

If Paul had actually said that, he asks **why am I still being persecuted?**

He's saying that there wouldn't be any controversy between him and the false teachers if he agreed with them.

Paul's comment about wishing they'd emasculate themselves is certainly attention-grabbing in a discussion over a circumcision controversy.

But it's also a passage where Paul is talking about love. That seems harsh.

I'd argue that it's less a statement about what he truly wishes these false teachers would do instead a way of equating these false teachings with practices of other pagan groups. That they're one in the same, because both these false teachers and pagan cult practices are not preaching the gospel.

We come to our third point.

The love that fulfills the law

Verses 13:

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

There's a lot going on in these two verses.

Paul talks about freedom but he also warns against trying to misuse freedom as an opportunity of the flesh.

Why?

Because that ultimately wouldn't be freedom. If we want to replace the slavery of the law by just living at the whim of our passions, desires, inclinations, that isn't freedom either. It's just another form of slavery. We can become slaves to ambition, slaves to the law, but we can also become slaves to ourselves.

Paul says to serve one another through love.

And then in verse 14, Paul says:

**¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

A well known Bible quotation. It originates in Leviticus 9:18.

What is love?

Love is a word that has been largely emptied of meaning in the English language.

The English language has the word “love,” and it’s come to be used for things we love, but also for things we like. If we can use the word to describe everything, we can run the risk of it not meaning anything.

We use the word love for how we feel about a spouse, a child, a parent, a grandchild, a grandparent.

We use it to describe our favorite team, our favorite food, and our favorite song.

Do we love those things?
In a sense, yes, absolutely.

I love Ohio State football. I love my wife. But the two types of love are not the same.

I love pizza. I love my son. But the two types of love are not the same.

One word but which is describing a wide range of levels of affection. And that matters because the Bible constantly talks about love but when we empty the word of meaning, we can conflate our love for people to some abstract tolerance or acceptance and call that by the name “love.”

When we have a word that can be used to describe anything, it can start to mean nothing.

If we think that we can use love to describe how we feel about anything, then that can give way to a concept of what it means to love something that’s really easy and asks nothing of us.

Think about this.

The command to love

Throughout the Bible, there are lots of commands to love people.

Why?

Obviously because it's important.

But it's also interesting that the command keeps coming up.

The fact that it has to be told to us over and over again points to the fact that it's actually hard for us to do.

The Bible doesn't call us to do things that are super simple and which come naturally to us.

There's no command to love chocolate in the Bible.

Loving people is hard.

And part of why it's hard is because we don't think it's hard.

Show of hands, who here struggles to love people?

No one.

It goes back to how we use the language of the things we love. If we will throw around the word "love" for things we don't actually even love, then we believe in an idea of love that's pretty easy.

The Greek language actually had four words for four different types of love. I'm not going to get into all of those this morning, but even to know that fact is interesting. That there are different ideas of love, different types of love.

And we probably all understand that but we only have one word for love.

We don't think it's hard to love people because we think love is easy.

Real love is hard.

Sometimes when we say "love," what we really mean is tolerance. Let and let live is not love. That's easy. Anyone can do that.

We do love our families. That's usually pretty easy, at least for most of them. They're our family.

But we're called to love everyone.

Now, that's easy to do in that aggregate. It's easy to love humanity as a human race and want what's best for it. And that's fine. But that's also pretty easy because that's so big and broad that we can also still get away without having that really needing to impact how we live.

But what about loving the people who are hard to love.

Jesus and love

We see that from Jesus throughout his ministry.

We see him associating with those his society most despised. We see him visit lepers, people who were viewed as inherently unclean and who were outcasts in their society. We see him show grace to a woman who was a prostitute.

One of his disciples was a tax collector. Tax collectors were hated in their society. For the Jewish people, they were looked at as being traitors to their people. Taking money from Israelites to give to Rome.

We see Jesus show grace to those who hated him, personally. Pharisees who plotted against him, guards who beat him, officials who crucified him.

Jesus loved the groups who were hard to love.

Conclusion

I'll close with this.

Every society has its groups it looks down upon.

We see how Jesus showed love.

Who are the groups with whom our society struggles?

Criminals.

People who struggle with addiction.

People who have hurt us. And that can be hard. There's incredible damage people can inflict. Forgiveness can be hard. Let alone saying that we love that person.

People who have different political views than us. The division right now in this country is incredible. Some of us can really struggle with not being judgemental on those who have some different political views.

You still have to love them.

How do we love people? It begins not with the people, but with the God we serve. Loving others is, and especially loving those who are hard to love is a reflection of our love for God.

We are to love others because we have a savior who loves us when we were unlovable.

Knowing the love God has for us. Knowing the need others have for grace and the gospel. Knowing that every person we meet is created in the image of God and is worthy of value and dignity.

How do we love people?

By praying for a person, by sharing the good news of Jesus with someone, by showing kindness to someone, by serving someone.

By stepping into a person's life.

Jesus stepped into our world to show love for our world.

Jesus went out and found the people who were hard to love. We actually can have pretty good control of our surroundings to avoid people we don't want to be around. And I'm not saying that we all need to make a checklist of every difficult group. But let me ask you this: when is the last time you've had to regularly interact with someone who challenged you? When was the last time you've been around someone where you've had to turn to God and ask you for strength to love that person?

For some of us, maybe it's been recent.

And I'm not even saying that you need to go out today and go out of your way to find the most difficult person you possibly can. But I think we do need to have some humility that love is actually hard. The love that God calls us to is hard. But Jesus didn't shy away from us, he didn't walk away from our world, he entered into it. He loved us when we were unlovable.

We can't do it perfectly. But we have a savior who loves us perfectly.

And the more we understand God's grace, and the more we grow in our love for God, the more that is meant to impact our love for those around us.