

Windsor Locks
Congregational Church
of
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Sermon Transcript
Sunday, August 22, 2021

Galatians: Faith vs. the Law
Galatians 3:2-14

This message from Scripture was given to The Windsor Locks Congregational Church of Windsor Locks, at 8 Main Street, Windsor Locks, CT, 06096, on August 15, 2021, by Pastor David Rucquoi. This transcription bears the strengths and weaknesses of oral delivery and is not intended to be a polished essay; rather, is provided as an additional resource for the message.

Sermon Text
Galatians 3:2-14 (ESV)

“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

Introduction

Last week I titled the message “Galatians: The Gospel.” Emphasizing the gospel, I also pointed out how Paul (in the Galatian letter) bifurcated unreconcilable elements, confronting his opponents as “*some who trouble you*” (1:7). I should have called the first message, “Galatians: The Gospel vs. the Error,” as today’s message, is titled “Galatians: Faith vs. The Law.”

The graph I showed last week revealed Paul’s flow of argument and repetition of themes, revealing the highest repetition in chapter 3 with the terms “law” and “faith.”

Years ago, I was working at Sandy Cove Bible Conference, in Maryland. One night I was awakened by pounding on my door. Two staff girls were urging me to come with them, as a girl we had been praying for was struggling with the prospect of becoming a Christian. I followed them to the main lodge, where the young lady was seated on a couch crying. Surrounding her were girls all talking at once, trying to witness to her. When they looked up I motioned for them to be silent, to let her think. Sitting opposite the ladies, I waited for the girl to stop crying, then asked her, “What is it you want?” She eventually replied, eyes down, “I want to be loved.” I let that hang silently in the air before asking, “Anything else?” Between sniffles she replied, “I want to be happy.” I waited again before asking, “Anything else?” She started to cry saying, “I just want peace!” I asked the girls to look up Galatians 5:22 and show it to her. When she cleared her eyes enough to read she began pounding the Bible with her finger, crying and shouting, “It’s there! It’s there! It’s been there all the time!” Then she held the Bible, cherishing each word. The girl next to her read the verse to everyone, which began by saying, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...*” in the exact order she had given us. If you recall our message last week, this was Paul in the Arabian desert, sorting through his training as a Pharisee and his experience on the road to Damascus. This was what he experienced repeatedly, as he poured over Scripture for 17+ years at his Synagogue in Tarsus, weeping and shouting, “It’s there, it’s there, it’s been there all the time!” From this experience Paul writes Galatians chapter 3.

The irony in this chapter is that Paul repeatedly uses the law (at least 11 times) to argue against the view that salvation comes by the law. Instead, he uses the law to show that salvation comes only through faith in the promise. In Acts 21 we see Paul accused of teaching “...*all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses*” (Acts 21:21). Since antiquity and Scriptures were their basis, Paul goes to Abraham (well before Moses) to make his argument from the Torah.

To avoid being distracted from the objective, what did Jesus say was the most important law? To love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, right? But what were they doing? Paul had to confront Peter for racism. This is the guy who had the amazing vision, in Acts 10, who saw the Holy Spirit fall on the Roman Centurion (Cornelius) – and all his family, who baptized them, and defended having dinner with them to all the disciples in Jerusalem (including the “*circumcision party*”), explaining God wanted Gentiles to have “*repentance that leads to life*” (Acts 11). Yet, Peter was so influenced by the circumcision party he wouldn’t eat with gentile believers, in the presence of believing Jews. Even Barnabas, the “son of encouragement,” was deceived by this teaching (Gal. 2:11-13). Imagine how the Gentiles felt. Do you think they felt “good enough?” With this behavior, would Jesus’ disciples convince others that there is no condemnation to those in Christ (Rom. 8:1)? Or would God be evidenced through the unity demonstrated by the church (John 17:21)?

We are going to focus on two primary questions Paul presents: How do you become acceptable to God? And how do you stay acceptable to God (remembering that, under the law, there were constant sacrifices, based on situations or scheduled ritual, to atone for sin)?

First, how does one become acceptable to God? Paul begins Ch. 3 asking the rhetorical question, “*Let me ask you only this: did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*” Historically captured in Acts, we can see the Galatian churches heard the Word spoken to them and believed it with joy in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13), and in Iconium (Acts 14:1-3), and in Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:8-25). Paul and Barnabas were so clear and adamant that Jews from those cities stoned Paul and left him for dead. And what did he do? Bruised and bloody, he got up, returning to each city to encourage the believers in the truth. Instead of asking, “*did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*” he could have asked the open-ended question, “By what means did you receive the Spirit?” But the answer was so obvious, he doesn’t prolong the point. They received the Spirit through faith.

Then Paul’s asks (3:3), “*Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*” The first question was past-tense. This question is present-tense. The falsehood encourages belief in Jesus, but adds something else (in this case, circumcision) to be “good enough.” This may sound like an inapplicable hang-up of isolated, uptight theologians “a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far away.”¹ But it could equally be worded, “How do I grow closer to the Lord?” Or, “I know I’m a Christian, but I feel so alienated from God” because of some sin. Have you ever done anything that causes you to hang your head in guilt? Have you struggled with forgiveness, or being forgiven? Are there people who alienate you, or that you alienate? Are there areas in your life where you are striving to somehow be “more good?” This is not just an ancient problem. It is a very contemporary problem with ancient roots.

Paul continues his logic in Chapter 3 saying, “*Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?* ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Gal. 3:4-9).

Here Paul is conveying at least three amazing truths. First, in answering his own question from v. 3, Paul is saying that they are perfected (mature, grow closer to God, overcome sin) the same way they received the gospel: through faith. Second, Paul explains the gospel from God’s promises to Abraham. And, third, Paul shows how God’s promise to Abraham applies to the Gentiles. To do this, Paul uses the Torah, the Hebrew book of law.

Paul’s reference to Abraham believing God “*and it was counted to him as righteousness*” (Gal. 3:6) comes from Genesis 15:6. This Abrahamic Covenant is recorded, with some variation,

¹ George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (Lucasfilm, Ltd., 20th Century Fox, 1977), from the opening scene.

multiple times.² God is essentially telling Abraham, “Because you trust in Me, I will make you a great nation, give your descendants great land, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.” Genesis 15 is the most dramatic versions of this promise. God promises to bless Abraham, prompting Abraham to ask, “How can this be, I have no child. My only heir is the servant who manages my household?” God tells Abraham the servant will not be his heir, assuring Abraham he will have a son. With great intimacy, God “*brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’*”⁶ *And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” God then promised Abraham the land, and Abraham said, “*How am I to know?*” This is where it gets interesting. God tells Abraham to bring a bunch of animals, which Abraham does intuitively, cutting them in half and laying in rows. Abraham understood God was preparing to make a covenant. Back then, this didn’t happen with paper and signatures. Their contracts were far more dramatic (see also Jer. 34:18). If a king conquered another king, he would cut the animals in half, the person making the commitment would walk between the halves stating the commitment. The implication was, if you do not fulfill your commitment, you shall be like these animals, cut off from fellowship, and (at the most extreme) killed. Often, it was the subjugated making the commitment to the overlord. So, Abraham expected some kind of covenant, and he expected to be walk between the animals. But here, God causes Abraham to be in a deep sleep, and then it is God, not Abraham, who makes the promise and walks between the animals. In an astounding reversal, there is nothing for Abraham to do but believe. In answer to Abraham’s question (“How do I know?”), God essentially said, “Because I promise, on *my* life.”³ God is telling Abraham, that the fulfillment of God’s promises rests on God’s character, not Abraham’s character. Abraham need only rely on God’s promise.

Notice the expression “*and it was counted to him as righteousness.*” This is not saying the trust from Abraham earned acceptability. Not even close. Keller explains that the term “counted” literally means “reckoned,” a term most translations avoid because it sounds like Abraham is from Texas. Well, half my family is from Texas, so I can interpret. The Greek word (Gal. 3) literally means “the bottom line” or “to reason to a conclusion.” The Hebrew counterpart (Gen. 15) means “to account,” “to esteem the value of,” or “to impute.” This is a term used for accounting. One of my accounting professors (at a secular school) tells how his wife was growing tired of him never being at home; so (without telling him) she signed up for one of his evening classes. He was quite surprised to find his wife in the first row of the class, pencil in hand. After the semester was over, he was relaxing at home when his wife announced she was going shopping, prompting him to lecture her on how they don’t need anything, and she shouldn’t incur expenses on things they don’t need. So it was that with a sassy smile she simply replied, “Don’t worry honey. I’m not incurring expenses. I’m just transferring assets.” As funny as this is, 2 Cor. 5:21, tells us, “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” God’s righteousness was transferred to Abraham’s account. Yet, this tremendous lesson only reveals part of the transaction.

In the third point Paul completes the transaction from the Torah, including Abraham and the Gentiles, stating, “*And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith,*

² Genesis 12:2-3; 13:15-16; 15; 17:8; 22:15-18; and 24:7, if not more.

³ Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: The Law and The Promise, Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1453642/1453642.mp3>.

preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). This is when Abraham trusted God, proceeding to sacrifice his son (Isaac), and God interrupted him, providing a substitute ram in the thicket (Gen. 22). I can't imagine Abraham recalling this story, after his experience on the road to Damascus, thinking, "It's there, it's there! It's been there all the time!" Keller points out that when we hang our head in shame we are only viewing Jesus as a good example, not a substitute; and we only view his gift as forgiveness, not righteousness. He goes on to quote John Stott who said, "the essence of sin is Mankind asserting himself to be God. The essence of salvation is God substituting himself for Mankind."⁴ Our understanding of Christ's nature and substitution impacts our appreciation of the scope of it.

In these references to the Torah, Paul relates that the true children of Abraham are children through faith. That is his legacy; thus, that is their heritage. And faith applies as much to Gentile believers as it does to Jewish believers. So what, exactly, is faith?

What is Faith?

In the book of Hebrews we see a concise definition of faith as "*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Heb. 11:1). Paul tells the Corinthians that "*the plowman should plow in hope ... of sharing in the crop*" (1 Cor. 9:10). Does the farmer plow in the blind, optimistic chance that a crop may be the result of his hard work, as if to say, "Gee, I hope so?" No. Though he doesn't yet see the crop, the farmer fully expects it. This "hope" is not starry-eyed, random, exuberance. It is reasonable, complete reliance. This is the faith of Abraham.

What is the Law?

In "The Jewish Book of Why?" Alfred Kolatch explains that a Jew from the era of Moses or Solomon would be completely confused by the Judaism of today, even in the observance of the Seder and Sabbath. He states, "the laws of the Bible, although primary and central, are not the only source of Jewish practice. Jewish law has never been static; it has continued to change and grow with each passing generation."⁵ He goes on to say that, "Should a custom conflict with some established law, the custom frequently takes precedence."⁶ While the extent of his view may differ for Orthodox, Reformed, or Conservative Jews, the Ancient Jewish culture was in stark contrast with the surrounding Mesopotamian cultures, in that the Jewish king was never the lawgiver. Therefore, a distinct Jewish identity was handed down through generations, despite geography, culture and politics.⁷ So we understand the law as both fixed, and variable.

After Moses delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they received the Ten Commandments, then all the law. The first five books of our Bible, called "The Torah." In this was the Tabernacle.

To apply the law, clarification was needed (like, what constituted work on the Sabbath?). Thus, oral traditions developed to apply the Torah, called the Talmud. Together, the Torah and Talmud comprise the strictest definition of Jewish law and can be viewed in three categories:

⁴ Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: Self-Substitution of God, Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1453643/1453643.mp3>.

⁵ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1981), 2-3.

⁶ Kolatch, 3.

⁷ Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. Translated by Linda M. Maloney, from *Sozialgeschichte des alten Israel: Eine Einführung*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt), 116-117.

civil (conflict between people), ceremonial (priestly duties), and moral (issues of personal character – based on God’s character).⁸ The Jewish canon (or books considered divinely inspired) includes the Torah, The Nevi’im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (other holy writings). As ancestral regulations evolved, so did mystical and philosophical writings and published sayings of inspiring teachers. Funny thing about human nature, as soon as authority is given to things that are written, a lot gets written, and what is considered “law” gains a broader definition.

The tabernacle, the emblem of God’s presence with Israel, cannot be separated from the law, and it evolved. It began as pillars of fire or smoke. The pillar eventually rested on the tabernacle, which evolved to Solomon’s glorious “First Temple.” Sadly, the Israelites lost land and Temple for violating the law. During this time, Jews maintained identity and connection with God through the oral and written word. Remote clusters of Jews evolved from homes to a growing network of study centers, called synagogues. As the Torah and Talmud were discussed, connection with God was unofficially, invisibly, subtly transferred from a building to the Word.

The struggle to keep the land and the Temple was as ingrained in Jewish heritage as the struggle to know and keep the law. Nowhere was this more pronounced than the period between the Old and New Testament history, when the conquering Greeks tried to abolish Judaism and replace it with Hellenism. They destroyed scrolls, prohibited Jewish ritual and traditions (especially circumcision), flagrantly desecrated the Temple, and tortured and killed freely, until the Jews revolted. This period was as recent to the Jews of Paul’s day as our own U.S. Civil war is to us today, gauging visible and invisible scars across the cultural landscape.

At the turn of the Millennium (37 BC to 6 AD), Israel was under Roman control. Herod’s spectacular renovation of the Second Temple provoked feigned political loyalty, while fueling Zionist hopes. Adherence to the law was considered the gateway to God’s blessing, prosperity, and freedom to be Jewish (wherein nationalistic and religious identity were synonymous).

The cultural, political and religious sensitivities of Paul’s era were embodied by people who watched the Temple’s renovation with excitement, some of whom would live to see its final destruction, along with the destruction of Jerusalem. This heart of Jewish ceremonial law stood, in Paul’s day, as a massive symbol. From our perspective, what was their recent history motivated passions as much as imminent history validated fears.

What is clear is that the law was codified in the Torah, but it was also convoluted through a web of writings, politics, culture, and emotional history.

Why is this so important?

The people promoting the heresy Paul opposed were deeply convicted and sincerely embracing the God of their youth. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he wrote, “*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Eph. 6:12). It wasn’t the people he was opposing; it was the teaching. Neither did Paul oppose the law. He opposed the thought that Jesus isn’t enough. Paul is not saying Christian’s should

⁸ Matt Slick, CARM, “*What are the main divisions of the Old Testament Law?*” Written February 18, 2015, Accessed August 18, 2021, <https://carm.org/about-doctrine/what-are-the-main-divisions-of-the-old-testament-law/>.

ignore the law. He's saying that keeping the law is not what Christians rely on. The conflict is awkwardly ironic; for as Jesus declares that we are "good enough," this teaching proposed that Jesus was not good enough, and that something else is needed. Paul is teaching that if you believe you will be saved, which will cause you to obey. The false teaching says, if you believe and obey you will be saved. The truth is: we are saved by atonement, not attainment.⁹

How does this apply to us today?

First, in Paul's day the symbolic issue was circumcision; but, the symptom, the evidence that something was wrong, was a lack of fellowship. Can you think of any issue in our society that causes Christians to alienate one another? Denomination? Elements of worship, type of music? Political party, or position on any political issue? Expression of national pride, or not? Race? Marital status, gender or orientation? Mask or no mask, vaccinated or non-vaccinated? The dissemination of information you don't agree with that promotes fear and division? I'm not saying these things don't matter. I'm not promoting wishy-washy convictions. The point in Galatians is that our earnest fellowship and sincere interaction should be independent of these issues. We may disagree on things (let's face it, we will), but we must value everyone (especially those of the household of faith) as "good enough," because Jesus died for them, and how we treat them displays that value. We are no better than others; but that's not the point. Anyone and everyone who trusts in Jesus is an esteemed child of God.

Second, is there a flaw in yourself, or others, you cannot overlook? Is there something you struggle to forgive, about others or yourself? If there is, it is a sure sign that your value-system embraces something more important than it really is, and Jesus less that He really is.

I'll end with this illustration. Have you ever noticed that it's easier to give than receive? To give provides a sense of dignity, strength, authority, autonomy. To receive gives you a sense of neediness, helplessness, dependence, humility especially if what you are receiving is a basic element of life. Now, let's look at two types of agreements. The first is an agreement based on law. I have \$1,000 in cash, and I offer it to you if you detail my car. Now, I have to agree that the car has been detailed to my satisfaction; but, if it is, the \$1,000 is yours. That is an agreement based on law. The second is an agreement based on promise. In this case, I offer you a \$1,000 check simply because you're my friend. All you have to do is accept it. Which agreement would you be most likely to accept? Paul's argument to the Galatians is that God offers an agreement of promise, and all we have to do to receive the benefits of that promise is accept it. This takes trust, humility, and embraces the authority of God; but, it is completely free; and, therefore, liberating. The alternative is to embrace your own independence, your own authority, and reject the need of what is offered. Veiled behind the façade of dignity, strength and responsibility is the fear of losing control in an unending ocean of subjugated duty.

Paul says, "*If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise*" (Galatians 3:29).

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⁹ Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: Relying on the Law, Accessed August 17, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1453640/1453640.mp3>.