

From Slavery to Sonship **Galatians 3:15-4:7**

We're looking at Paul's letter to the Galatians. And there are parts of the letter which you might read and think, 'this is theologically dense' and your eyes glaze over.

Except, the thrust of the letter is that there really are only two ways to live. And those two ways give you very different answers to the kind of questions we wrestle with in life.

Like, how do you deal with failure, when things aren't working the way you want? Or guilt and shame, when you screw up? Or how do you build an identity, a sense of self-worth, that's rock-solid secure, and yet humble at the same time? Or, as you look at the state of modern politics, how can you disagree with someone, but not hate them? Or on the spiritual plane, how do you move from a vague spirituality into a deeply personal relationship with God?

And the first of the two ways to live says, 'You've got to try harder, you've got to do more.' And that is basically our default mode. 'I, and everyone else, have got to sort ourselves out.' But in Galatians, Paul is saying, 'No, that's not the solution, in fact thinking you can sort yourself out is the root of the problem.' Instead, there's a second way. And it's the gospel, and it's based not on your performance but on God's promise. Not on you resolving to do better, but in trusting what Jesus has done for you.'

But, if you hear that, at some point you've got to ask, 'But surely, striving to be better, to meet a certain standard matters, doesn't it?' I mean, imagine a company, or a research lab that didn't. How long would they last? Not long. So what kind of person, or society, is going to be created by an attitude that life's not about continually trying to do better?

And that's the argument the false teachers fired back at Paul. Now, today, someone might argue that to make the world a better place everyone needs to live up to traditional morality. Or they might say, no, everyone needs to do better at being more inclusive and tolerant, or more true to themselves. Either way, both sides say there's a standard to live up to. Because we all have one standard or other. And for these teachers from Jerusalem, it's the Law of Moses: 'Paul, you say performance doesn't matter, but what about the law? What about all those times in the Bible it tells us that how we live, our performance, *does* matter.'

And that's what Paul responds to in today's passage.

Reading: Galatians 3:15-4:7

We're going to look at four things: the gospel comes first; the gospel brings freedom; the gospel gives an identity; and the gospel builds a community.

The Gospel Comes First

So when it comes to deciding whether life is about living up to certain moral standards or not, Paul uses Abraham as *the* test-case. Because far from him being blessed by God and approved by God because he obeyed the law of Moses, Paul says in v17 that the law of Moses wasn't even given until '430 years' *after* God had already declared Abraham righteous. And God declared Abraham righteous, because Abraham had believed God's promise that he could do the impossible. That God

could give him a son, against all the odds, and that through his offspring the whole world would be blessed.

But, if you're keen on the law of Moses, like these false teachers were, you might say, 'ah yes, but the law of Moses is like the latest iPhone isn't it? The newer they are, the better they are. And the law's an upgrade on the promises to Abraham. Otherwise, why would God bother giving it at all?'

So, v15, Paul uses 'A human example' - and it's about human covenants and agreements. Now, are there any agreements you've signed that, if you could, you'd love to change? Like your rental agreement. Wouldn't you just love to rewrite it and knock a few zeros off your rent? 2000 CHF/month? Nah, let's make it 2. Or your work contract: let's just add a few zeros to my monthly pay. But you can't. Verse 15 again, 'Even with a man-made covenant no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.' And God's promise to Abraham that he would have an offspring who would bless the world, came with no strings attached, so nothing that comes after can cancel that promise, Paul says.

But that raises a question, doesn't it? Verse 19, 'Why then the law?' I mean, if the law isn't an upgrade, what's the point of it? And, in response, Paul tells us what the law does, and in the process what the gospel does, that the law can never do.

The Gospel Brings Freedom

Look at v19 again: 'Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions.'

Now, what does that mean? Well, firstly, the law exposes sin. In Romans 3:20 Paul says, 'through the law comes knowledge of sin.' In other words, the law helps us see the mess we're in.

Before I became a Christian, a friend told me off for always swearing, and he said, you need to stop that. And I said, 'fine, I will.' But I couldn't. In fact, him saying that made me realise, every time I swore, just how much I swore, and how incapable I was of stopping it. And that's what the law does. It's as if it takes the lid off your heart and shines a light on it and says, 'You think you're pretty good, but let's just see how good you are at not getting angry, or being foul-mouthed.'

So, the false teachers were saying, 'You've got to obey the law - because that's what makes you acceptable to God' when in reality all the law can do is show you how unacceptable you are. The law says, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart' and you think, 'I can do that', and you try but what you discover is, 'er, actually, I love myself more.'

But as well as exposing sin, there's a way in which the law provokes sin. Paul says in Romans 5:20, 'The law came in to increase the trespass.' Now, when I was an undergraduate I heard a preacher tell a story of sitting in a train, and seeing a sign in the carriage that said, "Do not spit in the train." And he said, up until then it had never occurred to him to spit in the train, but as he studied it he could just feel the spit welling up in his mouth!

The college I went to has this beautiful lawn in the centre of Old Court. And there's a sign that reads, 'Do Not Walk on the Grass'. Now when you read a sign like that, what do you immediately want to do? Well, I resisted that urge for months. Until one Valentine's Night, when it snowed. And in my circle of friends was Maria, another medical student. And Maria was like a sister to me. And my friend John and I decided to sneak down in the middle of the night, when no-one was watching,

and write in the snow, on the lawn, with our feet, in big letters, 'I love Maria'. And we did it. And it felt sooo good - we had walked on the lawn; we had written on the lawn; and we had told Maria we loved her. And in the morning, Maria, and the whole college, woke up and looked down on that message. We'd broken the law and got away with it. Except, when the snow melted, it became obvious that by using our feet to rub in the message we had scorched the grass underneath. And for days after 'I love Maria' was tattooed in dead yellow grass on the lawn.

But take a biblical example. You read in the Old Testament that the people of God should give a tenth of their income to God. And as you read that, you can begin to think of all the other things you want to spend your money on. So the law has exposed the hold money has on you. But because it calls us to give *and we don't want to*, it also provokes the inner rebel against God. When you were ignorant of that law, money still had a hold on you, but when you become aware of the law it's not just the grip of money you have to deal with, it's the fact that you want to be in charge and not God. The law increases the trespass. You find yourself wanting to spit in the train, or walk on the lawn, or resist God.

But there's another way in which the law provokes sin. You see, if you think that to be acceptable you've got to meet some standard, you're going to need to try and narrow that standard down so you can meet it. For example, the law says, 'do not steal', and we think 'well, that means 'don't be a burglar', and I'm not, so, tick, passed that one.' But we've narrowed it down, haven't we - and now we're not letting it shine its light on how we claim expenses, or rob our employer of time, or plagiarise someone else's work. You see, it's only when you know you're saved by grace that you can let the law have its full, searching width - because it's only then that you know your acceptance doesn't depend on your performance. But think it does and you're going to narrow or lower that standard. And as you do, you let yourself get away with all these other sins. And it's not just religious people who do that. If you think that to be a good person, you've got to be tolerant and inclusive, you're going to need to narrow down who you've got to tolerate, and it probably won't include those horrible conservatives, or liberals, whose views are different from yours.

So the law exposes our sin, and it provokes sin, and as it does it tells us we can never make ourselves acceptable by trying to obey it.

And to bring that home Paul uses two pictures of what the law is like.

Firstly, the law is like a prison guard. Look at v23, 'Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned.' You see, if you think you've got to make yourself good enough, or attractive enough, or interesting enough, to be acceptable to God, or others, think how you end up feeling trapped, on the treadmill of performance. You know you should do better in this area, but you keep failing, and you feel beaten down by your failure. You have desires that you know are wrong, and the emotional energy you expend fighting them leaves you exhausted. You have this nagging feeling that you're guilty and it leaves you anxious about how you stand before God and others.

Think that you've got to make the grade to be acceptable and it's like a guard locking you in prison.

But, secondly, the law's like a guide. Look at v24, 'So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came.' And that word *guardian* is the word used for the household slave who would make sure the children in a Roman household went to school. And he'd accompany them, carrying a stick, to keep

them in line. And the law is like that guide: this is how to live, and if you don't, this is what the punishment looks like, and I'm going to make sure you get where you need to go.

But, did you notice that in both pictures Paul finishes by saying - 'it's for a limited time only'. Verse 23, the law is a guard, 'until the coming faith would be revealed.' Verse 24, 'the law was our guardian *until Christ came.*'

So the law was always, only, until Messiah, the promised offspring of Abraham, came. And it was to bring home to us - 'and you need him to come, to save you, because you can never save yourself.'

And he did come. And Jesus lived the life we fail to live. He made the grade. And at the cross he took the full punishment of the law for us for failing to make the grade. And it's as we put our faith in him, and not in ourselves, that just like Abraham, we're declared righteous, acceptable to God, by faith. And when that happens, and you realise, it's not about my performance it's about Jesus, the prison doors swing open and you walk out, free.

The law can never set you free, either from the condemnation of not doing enough, or the crippling uncertainty of 'have I done enough?' But Christ can and does. The law tells you, you need saving, and the gospel says, yes, and Christ is your saviour. The law tells you, you're in a hole of a prison, and the gospel says, and Christ sets you free.

And that can do something remarkable to you:

The Gospel Gives an Identity

How can you have an identity, a sense of self, that's absolutely secure, but at the same time genuinely humble? If you think you're got to live the right kind of life, and make the grade, to be acceptable to God and others, you're either going to feel insecure about yourself, because you know you don't, or proud, because you think you do.

And again, it's not just religion that fails you. Atheism and secularism can never tell you that you have any ultimate meaning; that your life matters; that you're of value. They can never tell you who you are.

But Paul says that that's exactly what the gospel *can* give you. The gospel tells you, you are more loved, you are of more value than you could ever imagine. Look at v26, 'In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.' And chapter 4v4-5, 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.'

You see, in Roman culture, if a wealthy landowner had no children, he legally adopted his favourite slave and made him his heir. And that slave went from being a slave to inheriting everything. And Paul is saying, that's what God has done for you. God has chosen you. He's adopted you. He's freed you from slavery and made you his son.

Now, if you're a woman, maybe you think 'I don't want to be a son, I want to be a daughter, calling me a son's sexist.' Except this is the opposite of sexist. You see, when Paul says in v26 'you are *all*

sons', he's deliberately including women. Because in that day, women could never inherit. They were second class citizens. But not in God's family. This isn't sexist, this is radical equality.

The god of personal freedom, that says abortion is a woman's right, that ends with millions more girls aborted worldwide than boys, that's sexist. The god of sexual liberation that oversees the explosion of ever more degrading pornography, or sex without commitment, that's sexist. The god of power that feeds a toxic masculinity that abuses women, that's sexist. But the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? - he's never sexist. He says that male or female, you are his beloved child. And it's Jesus who makes it all possible.

But it's the Holy Spirit who brings it home to you. Look at v6, 'And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"'

Now, if we could listen in on you praying, what would we hear? You see, if you think you've got to be good enough to be acceptable, you're never really going to be sure where you stand with God - so your praying is either going to be formal and reserved, or superficial, or both. But when you know that by his grace, and in his love, nothing to do with your performance, God has made you his child, and his Spirit lives in you, your praying is revolutionised. And you can call God, Abba, papa, Father. Just like Jesus did.

You can pray with the same confidence, the same boldness, the same right of access as Jesus, because by faith you're united with him.

And it's this identity that can now define you. Look at v27, 'For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.'

A couple of Sundays ago I stood at the door greeting you as you came in, and it was cold, so I put my hoodie on. And three of you, independently, looked me up and down and said, 'you're obviously not preaching today then.' But I was! But you obviously don't preach in a hoodie at Westlake! And you don't go skiing in your wetsuit, or snorkelling in your ski gear. What you wear says something about what you intend to do, or who you are, or what team you support. And when Paul says, we have put on Christ, he means, like clothing that identifies and defines you as Christ's.

Now, if I were to ask you, 'first and foremost, who or what are you?' What would you reply? First and foremost, I'm a mum, I'm American, I'm a post-doc, whatever. Well, to put on Christ means, first and foremost I'm a Christian, I'm on Christ's team.

And that radically affects the way you live. A few weeks back Su and I went to dinner with John and Hannah. And as I was sat there, peacefully, I was attacked and stabbed through the stomach by 6 year old Sam dressed as a Roman soldier. Dress like a Roman soldier, behave like a Roman soldier. And to put on Christ means to begin to think and live like him; to have him shape how you think of yourself; how you use your time; how you serve rather than take.

And that will inevitably affect the way you see others.

The Gospel Creates a Community

Look at v27-28 again: 'For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. 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.'

Now those categories are the stuff that divides people, aren't they. Barriers of culture or ethnicity; barriers of social class; barriers of gender. And we tend to like barriers, because they help us feel superior to those on the other side. But they also leave us desperately wanting to fit in. But how do you fit in? By being good enough? Or clever enough? Or earning enough? Or pretty enough? Or publishing enough?

But Paul is saying that in Christ, you've put on Christ, and now he's what defines you. So you don't need to look down on those of other ethnicities; or feel superior to others because you've achieved more than them, or inferior because you haven't; you don't need to score cheap points off the opposite sex to feel better about yourself. You don't need to do any of those because that's not where you get your sense of self-worth - you get it from Christ.

And that has the power to create a unique community - where it's not your performance, or background, or sex that determines whether you're in or not, it's Christ.

Think that life is about meeting some standard, and you're always going to be insecure or proud, with God and others, and you'll always be attacking those who aren't like you - which destroys community. Realise that life is about God's grace to us in Christ, that he makes us acceptable, and you'll have a secure and humble identity, a rich prayer life, and be part of building a great community.