

GETTING THE GOSPEL RIGHT (GTGR) (GAL 3:15-23)

Galatians Historical and Theological Context:

- A. To be justified means to be in right standing with God; to be spiritually clean and forgiven; to be a child of God...of Abraham.**
- B. Under the Old Covenant (OC), the means of gaining justification was through observing the clean laws (i.e. circumcision, animal sacrifice; Sabbath rest and washings re: to separation). Paul calls these “the works of the law” or “the law”(WOTL , e.g. 5:1-6).**
- C. Peter, James and the circumcision party still believe the WOTL are necessary for justification and therefore are attempting to get the Galatians to also observe the OC clean laws.**
- D. Paul however declares this “faith plus the WOTL gospel” false and damning. Not because it represents a legalistic, merit-based form of salvation¹, the Bible knows no such religion. It is instead because under the New Covenant, Christ has become our one clean law; the exclusive way of being justified; our only requirement for entering into a forgiven state and right standing with God; the single path to becoming the saved children of God and the children of Abraham. Therefore all that is necessary to gain justification is faith alone in Christ alone. Such justification however must be maintained through faithful obedience to all of God’s moral commands (antinomianism is rejected by both Paul and Peter (e.g. 2:17-20, 5:13-6:10; see also 1Co 7:19).**
- E. Paul writes the Galatians letter to get the gospel right (GTGR) on both issues (gain & maintain).**

11. GTGR requires understanding the purpose and place of the “works of the law” (or the OC) within redemptive history.

*The lack of understanding in this area is the number one theological reason (v. moral) the majority of people today are getting the gospel wrong. Hence, though this is the “deep-end” of Paul’s polemic in the letter, it is also the heart.

11.1. The WOTL (or the OC) were never a part of God’s plan in bringing justification to the Gentiles (15-16).

The “Who” of that promise was the singular “offspring” of Abe (i.e. Jesus Christ) v. “offsprings” (i.e. OC Israel).

11.2. The WOTL (or OC) were also never meant to replace the Abrahamic covenant or its unconditional promises (17-18).

The promise was unconditional not only in re: to “Who” but also “How” it was accomplished (by faith alone). However, the WOTL are not of faith (12).

11.3. The WOTL (and the OC) were a temporary means of justification until the coming of Christ.

11.3.1. (19-20) **“Why then the law?”** = The natural question in light of the previous two points. As before, what Paul is referring to by “law” is the WOTL (ellipsis); **“It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made”** = This again is speaking of Christ – the singular “offspring” of Abraham to whom “the promise” (of justifying/saving the Gentiles) had been made (8, 16). “Until” He was in the picture (and providing the means of that justification through His death on the cross²) some temporary form of atonement/justification needed to be “added because of transgressions” (b/c without some form of atonement, God will not enter into a relationship w/human beings – Isa 59:2). This then, is the answer to the question (“why...the law?”): they served as a temporary means of justification for the Jews (until the coming of Christ and faith alone in Him – Lev 4:20).

Their temporary/transient nature is seen also when considering the way the OC was established: **“it was put place in place through angels by an intermediary.”** = God did not enter directly into covenant with Israel (as He did the Abe). He instead established the OC through “angels” and Moses (the “intermediary” – Lev 26:46; Act 7:38, 53; Heb 2:2).

This (then) is what Paul is referring to in v20 when he says **“Now an intermediary implies more than one** (i.e. Moses and the angels), **but God is one”** = IOW: God was (again) not the “One” making direct covenant w/Israel!

¹ The 4th century monk Pelagius is the originator of such a soteriological system – not Judaism. In the words of Kent Yinger, “this is not to say that Jewish writers were unaware of legalism; rather, it was for them ludicrous to imagine that a frail human being could somehow earn God’s favor by doing...Thus in the end the only evidence of such a natural human tendency toward legalism turns out to be a particular Protestant reading of NT texts.” (Yinger, “The Continuing Quest For Jewish Legalism”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.3, p.382). Jewish scholars have attempted to correct Christians but to no avail. In this regard, Jewish scholar Sam Sandmel’s words are fitting, “It can be set down as something destined to endure eternally that the usual Christian commentators will disparage Judaism and its supposed legalism, and Jewish scholars will reply, usually fruitlessly...with those Christians who persist in deluding themselves about Jewish legalism, no academic communication is possible.” (Sandmel, *The First Christian Century*, p.66)

²Based on its usage in v19, ἕως (“until”) requires that the purpose be the same between why the law was added and the coming of Christ. As such, what Paul is communicating as the law’s purpose is not one of condemnation but justification (since this is the purpose of Christ’s coming and the focus of this section of the letter). It is however the former view which garners popular attention today, leading to a very unbalanced view of the OC and God’s law in general.

How this truth demonstrates the temporary/transient nature of the WOTL = It reveals that the relationship God possessed w/ the majority of people in the OC lacked real intimacy. Such was afforded to only a small few: the priests, prophets and kings/leaders (i.e. the anointed –e.g. Exo 40:15; Num 11:17; Psa 51:11; 2Sa 23:1-2; 1Chr 16:22; Num 11:29). However, under the NC (a covenant which God enters directly into w/us) it is just the opposite. We are all considered anointed priests through our receiving of the Holy Spirit in baptism and therefore experience true intimacy w/God (Act 2:38; Rev 1:6; 1Pe 2:9; 1Jo 2:27; Joh 14:16-18, 21, 23, 17:22-23).

What true intimacy (and possession of the Holy Spirit) looks like (in contrast to the OC):

11.3.1.1. Direct access to God (Mat 6:7-15; 1Jo 1:9, 3:22; Joh 16:26-27; Heb 10:19-20 v. Num 21:7; 1Sa 7:5, 12:19, 23; Ezr 6:8-10; Neh 1:4-6; Jer 11:14, 14:11, 42:4).

11.3.1.2. Direct help from God (Rom 8:26; Gal 5:16; Act 4:31; Eph 1:19-23; 1Jo 1:9 v. Lev 1-7; Rom 7).

11.3.2. (21) **“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?”** = IOW: Does this mean at one time God had a different plan of salvation? Paul is raising a question that many today have already answered in the affirmative based on their OT soteriology (i.e. OC: just. by merit v. NC: just. by faith³). Paul’s answer: **“Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.”** = If any of the WOTL could have truly produced “righteousness” in those practicing them, then they would indeed have qualified as an alternative/different plan of salvation (i.e. “life” – see 1Jo 5:16), but that was not the case (“certainly not!” = μή γένοιτο = God forbid, May it never be –Rom 3:31)⁴. Though God prescribed the WOTL as the means to entering into a justified state and saving relationship w/Him, it was forensic only (i.e. by declaration only). In reality their inherent value/ability was no different than any other sign/sacrament God prescribes (worthless).⁵ Here then is (another) reason for their temporary nature = no ability to remove sin! (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:9-10, 10:1-4).

11.3.3. (22-23) = In these final verses, Paul gives three additional reasons for the temporary nature of the WOTL (or OC):

11.3.3.1. B/C they **“imprisoned everything under sin”**. The “everything” finds its antecedent in the word “life” from v21. Paul is therefore referring to WOTL (and the OC)’s inability to not only make real (i.e. more than forensic) justification/salvation available—but also its spiritual abundant “life” benefits (i.e. “everything” associated w/real justification/salvation): direct help from the Holy Spirit, direct access to God and riches of the eternal kingdom (“the Jerusalem above” – Gal 4:26). All of those things were “imprisoned...under sin” (i.e. until sin was removed). This is why Paul states that “Scripture” is the active agent not the law. What again was being imprisoned was not our moral state before God but the prophetic blessings/benefits of justification. Prophetic fulfillment is the primary way the word (“Scripture”) is used in the NT and how Paul uses in Galatians (3:8, 4:30).

11.3.3.2. B/C **“we were held captive under the law, imprisoned”**. This time it is not lost benefits Paul is speaking of, but rather how inefficient the WOTL were for those “under” it⁶ (Act 15:7-11; Gal 5:1). The WOTL (and OC) was put people in “slavery (i.e. “held them captive”) to its elaborate system and set of clean laws. This is why (then) Paul chooses to use the unique phrase “under the law” which refers to the OC itself (Rom 2:12; 1Co 9:20-21). Fulfilling such laws required/included the infrastructure of the OC (i.e. its establishment of the Temple and priesthood).

11.3.3.3. B/C **“the coming faith”**...or **“promise of faith in Jesus Christ”** (i.e. our justification in Him) would be/is more than forensic. It actually makes us righteous before God (1Co 6:11; Tit 3:5-7; Heb 9:13-14).⁷

11.3.4. What not to miss = These three (or their antithesis) are the topics of discussion in the remainder of the book (AND) what the NT means by “grace” when speaking about it in relation to the Christian faith (it is referring to our available, efficient more than forensic justification). How much better the gospel would be served if Christians understood it biblically (v. its popular understanding which makes it nothing more than a “hall-pass” for sin as demonstrated by the common question when sin is condemned and confronted, “where is the grace?” - Rom 6:1!).

³ E.g. “Judaism and Pauline Christianity stand in stark contrast to each other.” (Paul Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, p.15); “On the basic question of how one achieves righteousness, (the answer of) countless others (is): Paul is the antithesis to Judaism.” (E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p.4)

⁴ The context of v21 (which is the OC) makes it clear that Paul’s present animosity against the possibility of another gospel/plan of salvation spans all of redemptive history. Paul saw only one gospel/plan of salvation through history (e.g. Gal 3:8). Therefore, to conceive of another gospel at any time is to be the person under Paul’s anathemas in Gal 1:8-9. As such, it behooves every Christian to make sure that the principles governing the gospel they currently possess are consistent with not only the New Testament but also the Old.

⁵ As affirmed by the Reformers, Scripture places no inherent value/ability in any sign/sacrament prescribed by God. For example, there is nothing effectual in the waters of baptism. What makes the difference is the appeal made at the time the sign is received (1Pe 3:21); and God’s promise to give what the sign represents. This is true for all sacraments/rituals (they are forensic only); the origin of their power existing outside of themselves.

⁶ “we” and the other first person plural pronouns used by Paul in 3:23-4:7 are in reference to the Jews only. This is proven by the fact that they were the only people historically “under the law” (i.e. under the OC system).

⁷ This was not the initial position of Martin Luther in relation to justification. He rather took the position of “forensic only” (*simul justus et peccator*) making the imputation of Christ’s justification not better than the WOTL. It was for this reason that he was accused by the Roman Catholic Church of embracing nothing more than “legal fiction”. It is also worth noting that his later study on the book of Galatians indicates a more biblical understanding (a just. which makes the recipient righteous – e.g. see comments on Gal 2:16). Unfortunately it is the initial position of “forensic only” that remains popular within Protestant Christianity.