

Sermon Series: *The Letters of Paul to the Galatians*

Relying On Works Brings A Curse

Galatians 3:10-14

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.*

Good Works Are Good, Right?

Most ministers would commend doing good deeds. Would you not agree? In fact, for some ministers this is *all* they can commend from Scripture. I read an article this week about two active ministers who say they no longer believe in God (and yet have retained their posts because they cannot find other jobs). These ministers, though presently serving their congregations, find they can only preach the parts of the Bible which talk “about being a good person.”¹ Evidently these ministers think it is good to do good deeds and so this is what they preach.

This is good right? This is good because it is good to do good deeds. God wants us to do good works Right? Doing good works and good deeds brings a blessing doesn't it? It is good to do good deeds. However, there is a way of doing good deeds will cause you to be cursed by God.

In **Galatians 3:10** Paul says, “*For all who rely on works of law are under a curse.*”

Relying On Good Works Brings A Curse

Doing good deeds is bad if you are doing them in an effort to earn God's favor. Doing good works brings a curse if you are doing them so that you will be accepted by God. If you think that God will give you eternal life based upon all the good works and good deeds that you have done in your life, then the first second after you die will be the most torturous moment of your existence. For in that moment you will find the truth to be the exact opposite of all that you expected it would be. If you have lived your life thinking that God will bless you, commend, and welcome you into heaven based solely upon all your good works, then the agony and shock that will tear your soul is unimaginable.

Imagine the horror of living life in expectation of divine blessing only to realize too late that you will receive the divine curse. How tragic it would be to busy your life with doing good works so that God would bless you only to suddenly realize that they were not enough?

¹ Source <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/atheist-ministers-leading-faithful/story?id=12004359&page=1> 13 Nov 2010.

Doing good deeds will bring a curse upon your head if you think that by doing them you will earn eternal life. Entrusting the safety of your eternal soul to your own ability to do enough good works to tip the divine scale in favor of eternal life will actually only result in eternal death.

“Those who rely on works of law are under a curse.”

Works & Doctrines of Devils

Relying on good works for the salvation of your soul is not a benign doctrine. It is not theologically neutral. It is a cursed heresy. It is the chief doctrine of the Devil and it has been since the dawn of time. It is the chief doctrine taught in churches today, especially in those churches who have non-believing ministers standing in the pulpit! Since they reject the way of salvation by faith as taught in the Scriptures, what else will they preach but “doctrines of demons.”²

The Purpose of the Letter to the Galatians

Destroying this doctrine is the reason the letter to the Galatians was written. We need to hear this just as much today, as they did in A.D. 48. Paul wrote this letter to drive this teaching out of the churches of Galatia. This season in this letter is time for us to be sure that this teaching (i.e. salvation by works) has no place in this church. And if we are wise we will be sure that it has no place in our hearts as well. Our time in the book of Galatians is in invitation to be sure that we ourselves are placing no confidence in our own works. We should examine ourselves and be sure that we by faith are only relying on Jesus alone for the salvation of our souls.

Paul has demonstrated that justification (i.e. being declared righteous before God) comes only through faith in Jesus. Paul pointed them to Abraham as the father of faith and he conclusively and clearly demonstrated that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works of the law (or by circumcision).

Then last week we saw that it is only those of faith who are truly the children of Abraham whether they were born Jew or Gentile. God’s justifies all people, both Jew & Gentile, the same way—by faith. **“So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham”** (Gal 3:9).

Those of Faith & Those of Law

Paul will now contrast those who are of faith, with those who are of law; those who seek to be justified by faith in Jesus with those who seek to be justified by works of law. The Judaizers had been teaching that it is OK to begin by faith, but faith alone was not enough. Works must be added to faith. Circumcision was necessary to secure faith. Keeping the Law was necessary to confirm faith (Acts 15:1, 5). It is against this doctrine that Paul is arguing most vehemently.

The Fundamental Reason We Are Protestant

This is the fundamental reason that we are Protestant and not Catholic. If the question is asked, “What must I do to be saved?” A Protestant minister would answer that question very differently than a Catholic priest. A Protestant minister would answer (at least one who is a believer), “You must have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” which would include an understanding sin and genuine repentance. A priest would say, “You must have faith in Jesus AND you must receive the sacraments.” The key difference being the conjunction AND. The priest would say faith AND works are both necessary for salvation. We Protestants would protest! Hence, we have our name, the Protest-ants, the ones who protest.

² See 1 Timothy 4:1.

The Catholic Church still to this day teaches that faith alone is not enough for salvation. The Catholic church teaches that faith is necessary, but not faith alone. Faith is necessary, but so are works. You must have faith in Jesus, but you must also receive the sacraments.

The official Catholic doctrine teaches that “the sacraments are necessary for salvation”³ and they “confer the grace they signify.”⁴ In other words, the sacraments are the means through which God’s grace is received and without them no grace is communicated. This is the official teaching of the church, however, there are many in the Catholic church who do not believe this.

This doctrine was codified in 1547 at the Council of Trent which was a result of the challenge of Martin Luther and the teachings of the other reformers that faith alone is the sole basis of justification. It was passages like the one before us today that the Reformers pointed to in their arguments.

The Folly of Relying on Works of the Law (vs. 10-12)

Having demonstrated that justification comes through faith by reminding the Galatians of their own experience (vs.1-5) and the experience and example of Abraham (vs. 6-9), Paul now demonstrates the folly of relying on works of law (vs. 10-12) as a basis of justification before God by making three points in his argument.

1. First, he will argue that those seeking the blessing promised for obedience of the law, must also accept the curses promised for disobedience of the law (v.10).
2. The law itself teaches that no one can be justified by keeping the law. The law itself teaches that justification comes through faith (v.11).
3. The law and faith are completely incompatible. They are mutually exclusive. Justification cannot be based upon both law and faith (v.12).

The Blessing of Relying on the Works of Jesus (vs. 13-14)

Paul will conclude this section by praising the blessing of relying on works of Jesus which accomplished two things, redemption from the curse and receipt of the blessing (i.e. Holy Spirit).

A) The Folly of Relying on Works of the Law (vs. 10-12)

Paul had previously described **those of faith** (vs.6-9). Now he will contrast them with **those of law**. He will demonstrate the folly of relying on works of the law.

1) Those Seeking the Blessings of the Law, Must Accept the Curses of the Law

The first problem he notes is that those who seek to be justified by the law must also remember that even though the law promised blessings for obedience, it also promised curses for disobedience.

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1129. Source http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P33.HTM accessed 13 Nov 2010.

⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1127. Source Ibid.

Galatians 3:10

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.’

Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 27:26.

Deuteronomy 27:26

“Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say, Amen.”

This verse he is quoting is the final of twelve curses that the Levites were to pronounce upon half of the tribes of Israel standing upon Mt. Ebal at the crossing of the Jordan River upon entrance into the Promised Land. Half of the tribes were to stand on Mt. Gerizim for the blessing and the other half were to stand on Mt. Ebal for the blessing (Dt. 27:11-13).

These twelve curses were to be quoted in the “annual renewal of the Mosaic covenant, and in many ways they serve to summarize the curses of the covenant.”⁵ It is assumed that the Judaizers had reminded the Galatian believers of this curse in order to convince them that they needed to receive circumcision in order to keep the law.

To Accept the Law Was to Accept It All

Paul, however, uses this verse to impress upon them fact that if they wanted to accept circumcision, which was only one demand of the law, then they must also accept all of the other demands of the law. The law is a unified whole. If you want to use the law as the standard by which you are accepted before God, then you can’t simply pick and choose which laws you keep and which ones you don’t. If you want God to accept you based upon the law, then the standard of measurement will be all the law, not just one or two. To accept one part of the law is to accept ALL⁶ the law.

Break One Law & You Break Them All

Paul is emphasizing the curse that comes to anyone who fails to keep all the law. His reasoning is plain. He makes this point because *there is no one who perfectly obeys all of the law, yet perfect obedience is what the law demands*. Anyone who fails to obey even the smallest command is guilty of breaking the whole law. Not only do we see this truth in the Old Testament (i.e. Dt 27:26, cf. Dt 27:1; 28:15), but we also see it in the New Testament.

James 2:10

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

Better Than I Deserve

This truth is incomprehensible to modern man. Virtually no one believes that one sin (even the “smallest” sin) is so sinful that it justly results in eternal separation from God. It is this truth that is behind the response that I often give to people when they ask me “How are you doing?” I often respond, “Better than I deserve.”⁷ I do this because because of **Romans 6:23**, which says,

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 117.

⁶ Paul adds the word “all” to his quote of this verse. However, he simply is clarifying the truth already explained in the context of Deut 27 & 28. See Deut 27:1 where Moses commands the people to “keep the *whole* commandment” and Deut 28:15 “be careful to do *all* his commandments.” Emphasis is mine.

⁷ I learned of this response from [C.J. Mahaney](#), former pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, MD and now president of Sovereign Grace Ministries.

Romans 6:23

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

God is so holy that it only takes one sin for a person to be cut off from Him forever, which is death. I have sinned not just once, but a million times. Therefore, I deserve a million deaths. Yet here I stand before you alive. According to God’s shocking grace, I’m still living when, clearly, I deserve to die.

I was at Lowes on Friday. The cashier asked me, “How are ya?” I said, “Better than I deserve.” His glasses were on the lower end of his nose. He glared at me over the rim of glasses for several long, silent seconds. Finally, he said, “That’s pretty scary.” I could see further explanation was needed.

I said, “Well, it only took one sin for Adam & Eve to get kicked out of the Garden of Eden and receive the death penalty and have sinned a whole lot more than once and yet I’m still living. The Lord has been kind to me.”

He paused and said, “So, you’re saying God has been gracious to you because He spared your life?” I replied, “That’s exactly what I’m saying.” He said, “Uhuh, now I’m understanding what you’re saying. He spared my life last year too!”

He went on to tell me about having a heart attack. What was interesting was that he had this heart attack just outside the doors of Mass General while he was on his way for a check-up! He was close enough to the hospital that he was able to get the help he needed quickly. Many are not so fortunate as he.

God spared Warren’s life too! He didn’t deserve to live, but by God’s shocking grace, he was still alive. By the time, I finished my paying I wanted to hug this man, but I settled for handshake.

Summary of First Reason Why It Is Folly to Rely on Works of Law

Paul’s point in verse 10 is that if you do **not abide by *all things written in the Book of the Law***, then you are under a curse. “The curse is attached to any failure to keep [the law], no matter how small. Since all fail, all are under the curse. Paul is assuming the universality of sin in this quotation.”⁸

The curse is universal since no one can perfectly obey the law. Therefore, it is folly to rely on works of the law in order to be justified before God, because *even one failure brings a curse*. Paul states the second reason why it is folly to trust in works of law in the next verse (v11).

2) The law Itself Teaches That Justification Comes Through Faith (v.11)

Galatians 3:11

11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The second reason it is folly to trust in works of law is because the law itself demonstrates its own inability. The law itself teaches justification comes through faith.

⁸ Frank E. Gaebelin, Everett F. Harrison, W. Harold Mare et al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans Through Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 459.

Paul writes that this conclusion (i.e. that no one is justified by obeying the law) is evident (*delos* δῆλον) it means, abundantly “clear,” and perfectly “plain.”⁹ For Paul, this conclusion is without doubt. **No one is justified before God by obedience to the law.**

The passive construction of the verb translated “is justified” (*dikaioo* δικαιοῦται) emphasizes righteousness as bestowed by another rather than as achieved by one’s own effort, which is Paul’s usual mood for the verb throughout Galatians and Romans.¹⁰

Paul is absolutely certain that justification does not come through the law. How can he be so certain, because the law itself teaches this? The law itself teaches that no one can be justified by keeping the law for it demands complete obedience which is not humanly possible. So the law itself must point us to another means of justification. Therefore, there has to be another way, a better way. The better way is the way of faith. Paul learned this from **Habakkuk 2:4**.

Habakkuk 2:4b

Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, *but the righteous shall live by his faith.*

The prophet Habakkuk made the better way clear. He who would be righteous before God will do so by faith. It is folly to rely on works of law when the law itself tells us that righteousness before God is received through faith!

3) Law and Faith Are Mutually Exclusive

OK Paul, we grant that faith is needed, but perhaps we need to combine faith and works. Perhaps both are needed in order to be justified. Paul gives a clear answer. This will not work.

Galatians 3:12

12 But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

Paul answers, “No. You cannot mix law and faith. They are mutually exclusive. Faith excludes law and law excludes faith. The law has no room for faith and faith opens no way for law. Justification cannot be based upon both law and faith (v.12). To prove this, he then quotes Lev 18:5.

Leviticus 18:5

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

Paul’s point in quoting Lev 18:5 is to point out that the law is based upon *doing* while faith is based upon *believing*. This verse about the law only mentions doing. It says nothing about faith because the law is not about faith. It is about doing. It is about works. Law and faith are not compatible. The two do not work together as a joint basis of justification. Therefore, it is folly to rely upon works as a basis of justification.

Then upon what should we rely? If there is no hope for justification before God through the law, then where is our hope? If the attempting to earn righteousness by good works only places us under the curse, then how are we to avoid the curse? If we cannot rely upon our own works, then what are we to do?

⁹ Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 118.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Blessing of Relying Upon the Works of Jesus

Paul quickly points us to One who is our hope. He points to Jesus. The only hope of avoiding the curse of the law, is to look to the only One who removed that curse and that is Jesus.

Paul points out two aspects of Jesus' death and resurrection. First, Jesus brought **redemption from the curse** and second, he brought **receipt of the blessing**.

Galatians 3:13-14

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.

Redemption From the Curse

Jesus has brought about redemption from the curse. “To redeem (*exagorazō*) means “to buy out of slavery” by paying a price. Christ paid this price by dying (cf. 1 Peter 1:18, 19; Acts 20:28).”¹¹ In the death of Jesus a payment was made that purchased freedom from slavery to sin.

The curse of the law applies only to those who have broken it. Breaking the law is sin. Every human being who has broken the law, even just once, stands under that curse. Everyone has sinned and so everyone stands under it's curse. However, Jesus never broke God's law. He is the only sinless person. He is the only one who is righteous.

1 Peter 1:18

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.

Since Jesus never broke God's law, therefore, He has the ability to remove it's curse because the curse has no authority over Him. The law only has power over those who have sinned. It has no teeth toward those who have no sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus paid the price of our sin by dying on behalf of all those who would put their faith in Him. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by Himself paying the price of our disobedience so that by faith in Him we might be freed from the obligation of paying that price ourselves. He did this by becoming a curse for us in the particular way he died. Paul illustrates this by quoting Deut 21:23 but let's read vs. 22 and 23 to get the fuller context.

Deuteronomy 21:22-23

22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

¹¹ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 460.

When criminals (or enemies) were executed their dead bodies were often hung on a stake or a pole demonstrating divine judgment. Joshua hung the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset they took his body down, threw it at the city gate, and buried it under a great heap of stones (Josh 8:29). Jesus was nailed to a tree demonstrating that He was bearing God's divine judgment on behalf of those who would rely on Him through faith.

The Great Exchange

This is the Great Exchange. The Righteous One died for the unrighteous ones. The Holy One took the place of the wicked ones. The Sinless Son bore the curses of the sinful ones. The innocent stood in the place of the guilty. The Perfect Son exchanged Himself for polluted sinners. The One who was blessed, bore the punishment of those who were cursed.

Why? Why did He do this?

Galatians 3:14

So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Receipt of the Blessing

First, Jesus died the way he did in order to accomplish God's plan from the beginning to include Gentiles in the blessings promised to Abraham. Secondly, Jesus died the way He did **in order to that the Holy Spirit would be given to those who relied on faith**, rather than to those who relied on works.

It is folly to rely on works. It is utter foolishness to think eternal life can be bought with a few days, or even a few years worth of good deeds. Relying on your own good works to earn righteousness will only bring a curse. Relying on good deeds to get you into heaven will land you eternally in hell. Don't put your faith in your works. Put your faith in the works of Jesus. If you will rely on Him, then He will redeem you from the laborious life of trying to earn God's favor. Trust in Him and He will give His own Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

under a curse are all
who rely on works of law

by failing to keep the smallest command
the curse of death, the law demands

failing just once is poison enough
to eternally undo every one of us

the truth then is plain to see
life — the law cannot bring

doing good deeds makes earthly men smile
but infinite good deeds in heaven goes not one mile

it is faith alone that make sinners just
in Jesus alone, can the hopeless trust

cursed is the one who hangs on a tree
Jesus hung & died there for you and me

though the curse did rest upon every head
Christ killed the curse when He rose from the dead

from the curse, those of faith Jesus redeems
and to them Abraham's blessings He brings

so trust not in works of law
but in faith, at the feet of Jesus fall