

GRACE: CAN FAITH AND FOLLOWING THE LAW WORK TOGETHER?

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February 12, 2023

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This morning we are going to be looking at a striking passage in the book of Galatians, chapter 3 starting at verse 10. But before we read that, I want you to come back with me to a moment in 1406 BC, a day that is recorded in the book of Joshua, chapter 8, and I want you to imagine this scene with me this morning.

The people of Israel had just recently entered the promised land, the land of Canaan, and they were now under the new leadership of Joshua. Moses had left them on the other side of the Jordan river and he went off by himself, and the Bible says that he died there, that the Lord took him home. He never got to set foot in the promised land, imagine that? The man who lead Israel for 40 years towards this promise but he himself never got to go in because he'd been disobedient. One occasion he was disobedient to God. I want you to remember that during this message this morning.

One occasion, Moses presumptuously struck a rock and he never got to inherit the promise of God. So under new leadership, the Israelites went across the Jordan river with Joshua leading. But Moses had given instructions before he died. You can read it in Deuteronomy chapter 27. The Israelites were to do something when they came into the land, and Joshua faithfully carried out exactly what Moses had specified.

After they had sacked the city of Jericho, you remember the walls came tumbling down, they then sacked the city of Ai and that meant that they had a beachhead from which they could take the rest of their inheritance. First they went north, and then they went south, they conquered every city and took the land as God had told them to do. But at that moment when Jericho and Ai had fallen and they had their first moment of pause, they were near the city of Shechem and Joshua divided all of the people into two groups. Six tribes in one group and six tribes in another, and leaders of six tribes went up onto one mountain, Mount Gerizim, and leaders from the other six tribes when to another mountain directly opposite, which is Mount Ebal. And from these two mountaintops, they had a kind of a church service.

I don't know if you've ever been to a liturgical church where they conduct the service out of a prayer book, its what I grew up in, the Anglican church, you'll know what a Responsive Reading is. It's much like how we did our Scripture reading this morning. The minister up front will say something out of the prayer book and everybody's got a copy of the prayer book in front of them and so they give the correct response. This is the liturgy of the church, they go back and forth.

Well, that's kind of what Israel did on this day when the leaders of the six tribes on Mount Gerizim and leaders of the other six tribes on Mount Ebal, they cried out from these mountaintops. From Mount Gerizim they called out all for the promises of blessing if the people would obey God. Here was God reminding his people of the covenant that he had with them through the law of Moses, and he said to them, "If you will obey, there will be blessing on you for obeying." You can go and read the blessings the leaders were crying out from Deuteronomy 27 and 28, all the things God said he would do if his people obeyed.

"I will bless you in the land, I will look after your crops, no plague will come near you, I will drive out all your enemies." All the blessings if they would obey.

But then from Mount Ebal, the other six leaders of the other six tribes began to cry out, and they cried out the curses that were promised if the people disobeyed God's law. And they went through them, all the things that they could expect. How many of you know that in Israel's history, that came to pass because Israel was not obedient and therefore, they were handed over to their enemies.

God had said this in the law and here on this particular day coming into the promised land, they cried out the curses. The promises from Mount Gerizim and the curses from Mount Ebal, and when the leaders cried out these things, all the people of Israel heard them. And after each promise and each curse, the people said "Amen."

Sometimes you say "Amen" because you are excited about what the preacher says, this "Amen" meant "We understand, we get it. We know what God has said in his law and we accept it, the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience."

I just want to show you something and this is really interesting, at least I think it is. In 2019, the most extraordinary archaeological find was made on Mount Ebal. We'll put up a picture of this.

That is a folded lead tablet that was found on Mount Ebal just a few years ago. It doesn't look much like lead but it's been in the dirt up there for three and a half thousand years. This is a little lead tablet that at one time would have opened very easily and was inscribed on the inside. Dr. Scott Stripling and his team found this tablet on Mount Ebal at the site of an ancient altar that they have discovered that dates right to the time of Joshua.

In Joshua chapter 7, it says that on this day that we've been talking about, when the curses were cried out from Mount Ebal, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal. They believe they found that very altar and that's where they found this little lead tablet. So what's remarkable about this lead tablet? Well, first of all, it's very, very small. That's how big it is.

It's a tiny little lead tablet but as soon as it discovered, the archaeologists knew what it was because we have other examples from the ancient world. This is one of the oldest that's ever been found but it's called "The Curse Tablet." If you open it up and read the inscription, which they've done. They couldn't open it on site because it would have literally fallen apart in their hands, but they sent it to Norway where they put it under special infrared lighting to read the inscription on the inside, what they found was that it's got inscriptions on it that include 40 characters that recognized immediately including the name Yahweh.

This discovery has been rattling the archaeological society as this could be the oldest Hebrew inscription ever found. The writing on the inside is actually proto-Hebrew, that is it's one of the earliest forms of Hebrew. It includes the name of Yahweh and they know it's the curse tablet and this little find debunks the theories that have persisted for a long time amongst some archaeologists that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Bible because there was no Hebrew language yet. And this is another discovery that shows this isn't true, they have also found other discoveries that date back to 1700 BC. But this discovery of the Curse tablet debunks the idea there was no Hebrew, and it's a tablet with the name Yahweh in it, it's a curse tablet on Mount Ebal. And remember that Mount Ebal was where the curses were called out by the people of Israel. Again, archeology is confirming the bible.

But why am I telling you all of this today? Because what we are about to read in Galatians 3 is stunning. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 3, starting at verse 10.

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’¹¹ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’),¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Galatians 3:10 – 14 (NKJV)

If you were to go back one verse, to verse 9, which is called the Blessing of Abraham, you would read these words. “Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith” (Galatians 3:9). That's a great verse because it deals with the blessings that have come to us because like Abraham, we've believed God's promises, but that leads Paul to write about the opposite of blessing. What is the opposite of blessing? Cursing. Mount Ebal instead of Mount Gerizim. It's the two things in the law,

the promise of blessing but also the promise of cursing depending on whether we are obedient or disobedient.

What Paul says next is really quite shocking. “**For as many** (everybody) **as are of the works of the law are under the curse.**” In this passage, Paul uses what we call the locative of sphere, it’s just a grammatical term which means that he’s talking about two spheres in his language. The sphere of keeping the law, and the sphere of living by faith. Two different worlds. And Paul says for all who are in the sphere working for their acceptance by God by keeping the law, they are all under the curse.

Now if we didn’t have the benefit that we have today of being able to read the whole New Testament, I wonder if we could have ever thought to say such a thing, let alone be bold enough to say it. But here is the great apostle Paul writing it in the strongest terms imaginable and he’s writing it under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit himself. “**For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.**” For all.

I’m just making this up now but if there are 3 billion, 200 hundred and sixty four million people who are trusting in the law to save them, that exact number is the number that is under the curse. That’s what Paul says, “**For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.**” Stop and think about that for a moment, how times in the Old Testament do the writers of the Old Testament extol the law of God. How many times do you read in the Psalms that David sings about delighting in the law of God and how much the law of God does for us. Doesn’t he say this in Psalm 19:7,

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”

The law of the Lord is perfect, but now Paul is writing that all who are under the works of the law are under a curse. Is this a massive contradiction in the Bible? We better understand what is going on here very quickly. Well, let me just give you the short answer immediately and then we’ll unpack this together over a few minutes this morning.

Here’s the quick answer, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the law of God. It is as David said, perfect. It has the potential to be a great blessing, but there is one problem. Only one individual in the history of the world has ever been able to keep it. That person as we can guess, is the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect sinless Son of God. Every other human being who ever lived has broken the law of God and if you break the law of God, you’re no longer being spoken to by Mount Gerizim, you’re being spoken to by Mount Ebal and the curse is upon you.

So if you’re going to trust in your ability to keep all of God’s law and therefore present yourself before him and being accepted, you’re already under the curse. When you

break God's law, it can no longer bless you but it only stands to condemn you because you are a law breaker. So here is firstly, and this is point #1 in verse 10.

1) WHY LAW-KEEPING CAN'T SAVE

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’” Galatians 3:10

Now what Paul does there in the second part of the verse is he quotes from the Old Testament. He quotes from the law itself from Deuteronomy 27:26. Guess what that chapter in Deuteronomy is? It's the very passage where Moses was telling the people of Israel, when you come into the land, I want six tribe leaders to stand up on Mount Ebal and six tribe leaders to stand up on Gerizim and recite for each other the blessings and the curses you can expect depending on whether you're obedient or disobedient to the law of God.

It's the same chapter and Moses says what Paul pulls out here. He says ***“Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” (Galatians 3:10)*** Notice some phrases there.

First of all, he says ***“all things”***. “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things.” You know what that tells us? You don't get to pick and choose which commandments you want to keep. It's not enough to say “I got nine out of ten of the Big Ten.” It's not enough to say “All of that law of Moses, you know I kept mostly all of it. I wasn't too good with this one but hey, what I did keep outweighs what I didn't keep.”

No, in order to be considered a law-keeper and experience all the blessing of God, you have to continue in all things, perfectly. James 2:10-11 reiterates this. If anyone transgresses the law in one point, they are guilty of breaking it all. You are a law breaker, okay! So you're dragged into court today, imagine this, and you're dragged in for the charge of theft. You don't get to stand before the judge and say, “I've never murdered anybody, I've never raped anybody, I've never defrauded the government of my taxes.” So what!

You stole, you're a law breaker! You are guilty and you stand there condemned as a law breaker and God says exactly the same thing. He says you've got to do all things to be considered for keeping the law.

Secondly, notice this. “Cursed is everyone who does not ***continue*** in all things.” So it's not enough that you kept the law for 50 years, you've got to continue it your whole life. There can never be a day that you have off from keeping the law. “You

know, God, most of my life I did pretty good, that one year was rough. We were stuck in our homes for Covid that one year, you can't expect me to be perfect that year. I mean, the new laws that the government handed down on taxes for climate change and this and that, you couldn't expect me to obey all of those particular things."

Listen, you've got to keep all of the law and you've got to keep it your entire life. "Continuing in all things." This is the standard. You might say that God's pretty unreasonable. The thing is, it's his law. He's the Creator, he's made the law and he is in the place to make this demand because he is perfect and sinless. He has never ever broken the law. He's never gone against the constraints of his own moral principles. God is absolutely perfect, it's his law so he can demand this standard, to which you might then reply, "Well, it's alright for him to make such a demand. He's holy, he's perfect, but look, he's living in Heaven, he doesn't have to live in this sinful world surrounded by all of our temptations."

But he did. Jesus lived the perfect life in God's unblemished holiness and think about this, the temptations Jesus faced were greater than any you will ever face. From this one perspective, if you're tempted to sin, when does the feeling of temptation finally go away? When you give in. You're tempted to do something and you don't want to do it, but then you give in and the temptation's no longer there, you've done it.

Jesus never gave in. The temptations that he faced were constant but he went through it perfectly and he never ever sinned. He never gave into sin in any way, he was the perfect Son of God. And so God demands this, he says "I've been perfect for eternity, I am perfect when I come among you as a man and live your life and I demand perfection.

John Murray, the great Scottish theologian said "The question is not how can God being what he is, send us to hell, rather the question is how can God being what he is NOT send us to hell?"

So the first thing is why can't law keeping save us? Because nobody keeps the law perfectly, no one in the history of the world. Not I, not anyone in this room, the Bible says "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." You know that in your own heart. You've let yourself down according to your own standards, let alone God's holy law. So this is why law keeping can't save, none of us can keep the law.

2) WHY FAITH AND LAW-KEEPING DON'T MIX

Secondly, Paul shows us in the passage **WHY FAITH AND LAW-KEEPING DON'T MIX**. So in other words, you can't say I'm going to believe in God's plan of salvation and I'm going to keep the law as well and between these two things, that's how God

is going to save me. Isn't that what the Judaizers were saying? These are the people that Paul was writing about in Galatians, these are the false teachers telling those early Christians, Jesus is wonderful, he's marvelous, he's come to save you but you also need to keep the Jewish law. You have to become Jewish first, otherwise he can't save you.

So this is a mix of the life of faith in Jesus and law-keeping, that's what saves us and Paul says nonsense! Faith and law keeping don't mix. Look at verses 11 & 12. Paul says

“But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’” (Galatians 3:11-12)

Listen to what Paul's saying, he's saying that old law keeping, if you're going to go that route, it has nothing to do with faith. You've just got to dot every I and cross every T. You've got to do it. It's not believing, it's doing. Paul says the just shall live by faith but law keepers will live by doing. So what he's saying here is they are two completely distinct roads. We cannot be saved partly by faith and partly by works. You travel on one road or the other, pick.

You can only be under law or under grace. Romans 6:14-15. Let me just sidetrack here for a moment to make this point. Someone might read this in Galatians and say “hang on, he's writing to the Galatians and the Galatians were gentiles and they didn't have Moses' law at all so this issue is kind of difficult for them to understand. But in this passage, Paul never uses the phrase to about “The Law.” He talks about law without the definite article. He says law, you're either on the road of law or you're on the road of grace.

See, even if you're not a Jew, the law of God is written on your heart. This is his argument in Romans chapter 1, that none of us are without law whether we're Jew or Gentile. God has written it on our hearts and we are responsible to keep the law according to the light that we've been given and nobody does. Whether you're in Israel or whether you're in Timbuktu in Africa or in the jungles of West Papua, nobody keeps the law that is written on their heart. We all fall short of God's glory. So faith and law-keeping don't mix. They're two different roads. You're either going to trust God by faith for his salvation, for his righteousness or you are going to try and do every part of the law.

3) HOW CHRIST IS THE ANSWER

Then thirdly, given this huge problem, Paul says HOW CHRIST IS THE ANSWER. Because so far, this is all bad news, isn't it. This is all Mount Ebal, this is all curse but Paul says the answer is Christ.

“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’).” Galatians 3:13

So here is Paul talking about the whole substitutionary atonement, that Jesus came and took our place. We were under the curse because we could not keep God's perfect law but Jesus came and became a curse for us. Why doesn't Paul say Jesus came and was cursed for us? It says he became a curse. It's the only way for Paul in language to express just so perfectly identified with our sin in that moment, that he took every sin of mankind upon himself. He bore it all and died for it.

Now Paul's reference here in verse 13 says ***“for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’”***, he's quoting again from the law of Moses from Deuteronomy 21, verse 23. Let me just explain for a moment what Moses was talking about in Deuteronomy 21 when he said “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” In that ancient world, they killed people a lot of different ways but at the time of Moses, they didn't have crucifixion, that's a much later development brought in by the Persians actually and it has nothing to do with the time of Moses. But whether a person was stoned to death or if they died in battle by the sword or if something else happened to them, if the people wanted to completely dishonour them, they would take the dead body and hang it on a tree for display. Moses says “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.” In Deuteronomy, it's actually saying don't do this, don't dishonour people in this way.

We have an example of it happening in the life of King Saul and Jonathan. If you remember, when they died in battle, the Philistines took them and hung them on the walls of Beth Shan. When they did that, it was a sign of the Philistine victory and it was a dishonouring of the Israelite people as they hung Saul and Jonathan on the walls.

So Moses refers to this practice in the ancient world and he says “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Paul points out now in Galatians 3 that crucifixion therefore is considered by the Jews an especially cursed way to die. So when the Romans started doing this, the Jews couldn't fathom a more shameful way for a person to be executed than to be hung on a “tree” figuratively. The crosses that they used and the pieces of wood like a tree. This was an reprehensible and shameful way for anyone to die, and it was reserved even by the Romans for the worst of criminals.

Jesus went and he died the most shameful death, cursed. The Jews believed this that if a person was crucified, they must be cursed by God and that's the death that Jesus died. Christ has redeemed us from the curse that we are under because we are law breakers having become a curse for us, for it is written cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Jesus took your shame, he took all of your curse before God and he died in your place to bring you back into blessing.

Now look at verse 13 again, look at the word "**redeemed**", "**Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law.**" There are three different words used in the New Testament that can be translated "redeemed" and they're all wonderful words. But this is the strongest and the most interesting of the three words that mean "redeemed." One of the words that is used very often in Paul's writings and in other writers in the New Testament is the Greek word "agorazo", which comes from the root word "Agora" which means marketplace. If you go to any old Greek city, the central marketplace was called the Agora, so "agorazo" refers to the marketplace and the word means to buy from the marketplace. When it says that Jesus redeemed us, he bought us with the price of his own blood. "Agorazo" especially refers to slaves being bought for money in the marketplace. We were slaves to sin and Jesus paid the price with his own blood to buy us, to redeem us. And that word is used several times in the New Testament.

But here, Paul uses a slightly different variant of the word "agorazo," he uses the word "exagorazo." He adds a little two-letter prefix to it but he changes the meaning. He strengthens the word from meaning "to buy from the marketplace," now it means this: "to buy out from the marketplace." You say, that doesn't sound like much of a difference. Well let me tell you the difference. To buy from the marketplace or to buy out from the marketplace. Listen, Jesus didn't just redeem us, he redeemed us out of. Think of this, a slave might be bought from the marketplace but remain a slave.

If I lived back then, I go down to the marketplace, I pay my money to purchase a slave, that slave now belongs to me. Is he out of slavery? No, he's in slavery to me. And let's just say that he's not the strongest guy that I've ever had on my property, and when I send him out into the fields to work, he doesn't get a lot done. He's not pulling the plow very well and not doing a great job. So I take him back to the Agora a few weeks later and what do I do, I trade him in. I sell him back into slavery at the marketplace and buy another slave. That's what "agorazo" could mean, but "exagorazo" cannot mean that.

What Paul is saying here is we've been bought out of the marketplace all together. We've been redeemed out from the market all together. We've been taken off the market, that's what he says. In the culture of the times, on rare occasions, a friend or a family member might come down to the Agora and purchase a slave for one purpose. Not to bring them to work for them. Purchase them to set them free and

that's what Paul says Jesus has done for us. He purchased us out of the marketplace, never to be slaves again!

How many people have thought that Jesus came to buy us out of the slavery of sin to put us into the slavery of religion. Jesus said, Not on your life! He's not delivering us back to the law, he has brought us out of the marketplace to be free, to walk with God as free men and women. That is what Paul is saying here.

That brings me to dig a little deeper into these words to something here in the language that Paul uses that you just couldn't read in English, you couldn't get it and I have to give you this this morning. Paul uses three prepositions in this verse that tell us what God has done for us in Jesus. This is the grammar of grace, now watch this.

“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’).” Galatians 3:13

Three prepositions, watch. We were under the curse of the law and the preposition that appears here is the Greek preposition “hypo.” Christ has redeemed us who were hypo the law. We were under the curse of the law.

I want you to think about this for a moment, there's a story from about the 4th century AD from Sicily about a man named Damocles and maybe you've heard of him. He was a courtier in the court of the king and he was a bit of a flatterer. And he spoke to the king, Dionysius and he said “Oh you've got the life, you are a great king and look how wonderful you are in all of your splendour. No one has had such a great life as you! What an amazing king you are.” Dionysius said, “oh really? How about we trade places for a day and you see what it's like to be me.”

Damocles thought this was a great idea so they traded places for one day and he enjoyed having the servants come and feed him grapes and he enjoyed being able to do whatever he wanted, thinking this was marvelous. Until he looked up. When he looked up, Dionysius had suspended a sword hanging over his head by a horse's hair. Dionysius was making the point, “You think it's great to be the king, yes there are certain luxuries, but I live always under a sword.” That is, people wanted to kill him. It was called The Sword of Damocles.

Here's the thing, all of us in the law are living under the sword of Damocles because we're all law breakers and as soon as we pass from this life, we must pass into final judgment and the absolute curse of being sent from God's presence forever and ever. We are under the sword of Damocles.

We were under the curse of the law. What separates you from hell, you think there's

years that separate you from hell if you don't know Jesus Christ because you're a young person. No, listen, it's a heartbeat, it's a breath, it's a horse's hair.

We were living in that condition under the curse of the law but then Christ came, second preposition, he came above us because the preposition is hyper here in this verse. "**Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become** (and the word is hyper) **a curse for us.**" He came above us. So the sword is hanging over us, we're under the curse but Jesus came and he, like the hymn writer says interposed himself between us and the curse.

And the third preposition is that Christ took us out from under the curse. The Greek word there is the little word "ex" in the word redeemed "exagorazo." He took us out from under the curse so we're under the curse, Jesus came above us and in the process, he bore the curse on the cross.

There's a false idea that sometimes Christians fall into that Jesus came to do "something" and his death on the cross had something to do with it but because Jesus did that, God let us off all of our sins. That's not what the Gospel says. Nothing has been let off at all. The sin has been completely paid for, the judgment was totally exacted. Jesus bore all of the wrath of God on the cross. That's why you have that moment of dereliction on the cross where Jesus say "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

He bore all of our curse, he took it and then brought us out from under it, never to be there again. He has brought us back to the blessed state of being in communion with God.

We just celebrated Christmas a bit ago, that time where we celebrate God the Father sending his son down to earth as a baby to bring about the redemption of the law breakers. And the baby grew up, Jesus lived the perfect God pleasing life. He kept the law of God perfectly, not the traditions of man that were added to the law but the law as Moses gave it. He kept it perfectly from his actions but also from the heart. The words of his mouth, the very thoughts of his heart were all righteous. He walked in all the blessing of God the Father. "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

30 years of evaluation of his life and God says, he's perfect in every way, in spite of the temptation, in spite of living with our weak body, he came and he fulfilled it completely. But then he did the unimaginable, having lived perfectly for us, he interposed himself and died for us if only we would believe on him, if only we would trust in him completely and give up trying to be good enough ourselves. He exchanged his life for ours, he took the curse in our place so that we could be blessed and that's where Paul arrives in verse 14.

“That the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Galatians 3:14

Notice that the blessing is not just for Jewish people. Paul uses two expressions there in the one sentence. He says that the blessing might come upon the gentiles that we might receive the promise. Paul's not a gentile, he's a Jew. So what he's saying is that Jews and gentiles together can inherit all the blessing of Abraham. Paul underlines again, Jesus Christ has brought us back full circle to the original promise. “In you Abraham, in your see, all the nations of the earth at last will be blessed.”

If you're trusting in Jesus Christ today as your Saviour, all of the blessing, all the righteousness, all the justification that was declared for Abraham is declared for you. If you try to do this by religion, you are cursed.

Let's pray.