

The Purpose of the Law

Galatians 3:19-22

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
www.branchofhope.org
9/15/2002*

The Purpose of the Law

Galatians 3:19-22

What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.²⁰ Now a mediator does not *mediate* for one *only*, but God is one.²¹ Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.²² But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:19-22).

Paul has been emphasizing how man is justified by faith rather than works. Man's best effort at keeping the law avails nothing toward justification. Our peace with God is a result of God's promise, not our abilities.

For if the inheritance *is* of the law, *it is* no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise (Galatians 3:18).

The natural question that arises then is, "What purpose does the law serve?" Before we seek to answer this question, some discussion is necessary. The end of the present chapter has been the source of much controversy. We will read of why God gave the law to Moses and we will also read of how it is no longer useful (verse 25). The law was a tutor that brings us to Christ. But after faith had come, we are no longer under a tutor. What does all this mean? What could it not possibly mean?

No Law at All?

This has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Those who break history into unique and self-contained dispensations (dispensationalists) will often argue that the law, in its entirety, is to be cast aside. Churches are criticized for reciting the Ten Commandments and accused of being legalistic. It is my belief that these expositors are missing the point of this passage altogether.

The Christian Ethic

Very seldom would people who hold this view suggest that Christians, saved by grace, needn't seek to live some sort of holy life. When asked what the standard is they will give a variety of answers.

Follow the Spirit

At times they will say we must follow the Spirit. But apart from objective, knowable truth, this is mere relativism with Christian lingo. More than once I have talked to people who had the Spirit lead them to divorce their spouse for no biblical reason. These, and other examples like this, have led the people – when I questioned their decision – to accuse me of questioning the Spirit of God Himself. One needn't be a logician to recognize that to push this to its natural conclusion leaves the individual person in the place of God.

Imitate Jesus

Another common replacement for the law of God as the guide for ethics is the exhortation to imitate Jesus. *What would Jesus do?* is the popular slogan. But then we must ask what it is about Jesus that I should imitate. Did not Jesus keep the law? Was not Jesus born under the law? It seems very inconsistent to speak against the law and then say we should imitate somebody who kept the entire Mosaic Law perfectly.

Restated Laws

The way the dispensationalists interpret the Bible will also lead them to assert that it is only the laws restated in the New Testament with which the Christian need concern himself. This fails on a couple of counts:

First, it is not the design of the New Testament, or new covenant, to bring the law. John writes, **“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17)**. You can't argue against law and then try to find law in a place where the Bible says we are to be looking for grace. Since the time of Moses wasn't completely absent from grace, we must understand a verse like this to mean that the fullness of law is found in Moses (though Moses also had the shadows of God's grace) and the fullness of grace is found in Christ (though He clearly gives commands). It is not one to the exclusion of the other.

Second, if God makes a law only God has the right to repeal the law. He does this numerous times in the New Testament, for example, dietary restrictions (Acts 10), circumcision (Galatians), human priesthood (Hebrews), etc. We do not take it upon ourselves to decide what no longer applies. God will inform us in His word.

The Use of the Law

In short, I think it is foolish to think that when Paul teaches some sort of abrogation of the law, he is suggesting that the law in its entirety is to be

ignored. There are many purposes that the law of God serves which aren't addressed in the passage before us.¹ The Larger Catechism touches on the subject in its 95th question.

Of what use is the Moral Law to all men?

The moral law is of use to all men, to inform them of the holy nature and will of God,^a and of their duty, binding them to walk accordingly... a. Lev. 11:44-45; Lev. 20:7-8; Rom. 7:12.

Ethics

The moral law tells us of the nature of God. It reveals what is good and right and is the ultimate and final authority concerning all matters of ethics. Apart from God's law men are left to their own innovations and ingenuity. There is no absolute right or wrong. There are merely conventions (conventional thinking or opinions).

Autonomy or Theonomy

We are left with two options: autonomy or theonomy?² This will almost always result in a "might makes right" society since the "mightiest" will inevitably foist their system of ethics upon the less powerful. Relativism takes over and nobody can objectively declare any behavior to be ethical or unethical.

The public school system boasts of being separate from God. In some ways I think this is good, for who would want government-run theological instruction? But on the other hand, if a student were to say, "I have decided to cheat. In my worldview cheating is okay. Anything is okay, and to be admired, that promotes my personal pleasure and success." By what standard can the teacher or principal chastise such behavior? In order to be consistent they must allow cheating.

Convinced of Sin

But ethics is not the only reason for the law. And it is not the reason presently brought up by Paul. The catechism goes on to say that the use of the moral law is effective...

... to convince them of their disability to keep it, and of the sinful pollution of their nature, hearts, and lives:^c to humble them in the sense of their sin and misery,^d and thereby help them to a clearer

¹ The way it is used, or misused, in the passage before us is as a means of justification.

² Meaning God's law and not necessarily, at least in this reference, the theological system which bears its name, although I believe the system to be very sound.

sight of the need they have of Christ^e and of the perfection of his obedience^f b. Micah 6:8; James 2:10-11. c. Ps. 19:11-12; Rom. 3:20; 7:7. d. Rom. 3:9, 23. e. Gal. 3:21-22. f. Rom. 10:4.

End of the Law

This is one respect in which Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4). This verse is often twisted by antinomians (anti-law) and dispensationalists, as if Paul were saying that the law is no longer God's standard. The word "end" here is the word *telos*, which means purpose or goal. In the subject before us, Christ is the purpose of the law. When one looks at the law honestly, he realizes he has no hope of living up to such a standard. Paul writes in Romans, "**Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin**" (Romans 3:20).

Let us now look at Paul's words.

Added Because of Sin

What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made... (Galatians 3:19a).

When Paul writes that the law was added because of transgression, he means that the law would become an instrument to reveal the great darkness in the hearts of men. As we read in Psalm 19:7, "**The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.**" What role does the law play in converting the soul? Paul teaches us this in Romans 8,

**Has then what is good (the law) become death to me?
Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was
producing death in me through what is good, so that sin
through the commandment might become exceedingly
sinful (Romans 8:13 – parenthesis mine).**

Merely Aware of Sin?

But we must go further here. Is being aware of our own sin sufficient to draw a person to Christ? Is it not the presentation of the gospel which brings a person to Christ (Romans 1:16)? Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17). The gospel is not merely a presentation of the law. It is also the presentation of the means of escape from the consequences of the law – which is the work of Christ the Savior.

The Effective Shadows

In all of history (both old and new testaments) Christ and Christ alone is sufficient to appease the wrath of God and to free men from the just penalty due them from a righteous and holy God. What we must also realize then, is that the Law of Moses (which is what Paul is stressing when he mentions the law) also contained the gospel in the form of shadows or types. Included, and likely targeted, in Paul's negative comments toward the Law of Moses are those shadows: feasts, days (Galatians 4:10), circumcision, etc.

Moral and Ceremonial

The reason I believe the shadows (ceremonial laws) are what Paul primarily has in mind here is, 1) because ceremonial laws are what he uses as an example and, 2) because the moral law continues to serve as a revealer of sin to men. It has not lost its usefulness. The ceremonial law is no longer useful.

Ceremonial Reveals Sin and Christ

The ceremonial law, with its spilling of much blood and various sacrifices, served well (even though it was merely a shadow) to reveal the due penalty of sin and transgression. It also served well to show God's promise of deliverance – all these sacrifices foreshadowing Christ. But when the seed arrived, the shadows were no longer effective or necessary.

I may speak on the phone to my wife in her absence. I may learn of her and enjoy her company by phone. But when we behold each other face to face the phone is no longer useful. It was good for its time.

A Direct Promise

...and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.

²⁰ **Now a mediator does not *mediate* for one *only*, but God is one (Galatians 3:19b, 20).**

The law, in its own way, was glorious and given through angels and God's prophet, Moses. And even though there are over four hundred given interpretations of this verse, it seems most fitting, given the context, to interpret this with the understanding that the promise required no mediator but was given directly by the one God to Abraham.

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law (Galatians 3:21).

The law was, therefore, not at odds with God's promise. It was never the design of the law to be a ladder men would climb to heaven. The design of the law (especially the ceremonial law) was to reveal the promise.

But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).

Who's Judging Whom?

Though I don't think Paul is straying here from addressing the sin revealed through the sacrificial system (realizing that system included the declaration of a perpetual moral law), let us realize that any honest person who reads the Bible will find its law to be their judge. In a world of skeptics, critics, and judges of the veracity of God's word, God's word declares, with an overarching authority, its own power to judge. Hear the words recorded in Hebrews.

For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Hebrews 4:12-13).

The True High Priest

But the author of Hebrews does not leave us with this sentiment of mere conviction with no redemption. He finishes his thought speaking not of human priests who die but of the High Priest, in whom is found grace, mercy, and deliverance from the penalty of the law.

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Questions for Study

1. What is wrong with following the Spirit as opposed to the law when it comes to Christian ethics (page 2)?
2. Why is the exhortation to imitate Jesus contradictory when it is spoken by those who are opposed to the law (page 2)?
3. Is it true that a law must be restated in the New Testament in order to be binding (page 2)?
4. What are some proper uses of the law (pages 3, 4)?
5. What does it mean that Jesus is the “end” of the law (page 5)?
6. Why was the Law of Moses added (page 5)?
7. What aspect of the law is Paul likely targeting in this passage (page 5)?
8. Why is the moral law still useful (page 5)?
9. Why is the ceremonial law no longer useful (page 6)?
10. Why does Paul make the distinction between the law having a mediator and the promise having no mediator (page 6)?
11. What was the purpose of the Scripture confining all under sin (pages 6, 7)?