

**The Curse of the law**  
SERMON  
by  
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**TEXT:** Galatians 3:1-14

**PROP:** Because no man can keep the law perfectly we must be justified by God through faith in Christ.

**Galatians 3:1–14 (ESV)**

**By Faith, or by Works of the Law?**

**3** O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. **2** Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? **3** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? **4** Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? **5** Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— **6** just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

**7** Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. **8** And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” **9** So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

**The Righteous Shall Live by Faith**

**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.

It is very difficult for many of us to go through life without running afoul of the law. We tell the policeman that we didn't see the traffic sign but he informs us

that he is sorry and gives us a ticket anyway. It is the law whether we know it or not. When we break one of God's commandments we cannot say to him "I did not know it was against the law" nor can we say "you trapped me". God has made His laws known to us both in the Bible and in our conscience. Paul writes:

**Romans 2:14–15 (ESV) — 14** For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. **15** They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

So you see we cannot say to God "you trapped me, you are unfair" because he created us with a moral conscience that knows what is right and what is wrong instinctively even when we don't know the law. Then too, he has caused his law to be written and made public so we cannot plead ignorance of the law. Ignorance of the law is no excuse!

However, this whole problem of keeping the law becomes much worse. Paul tells us that the Law is a curse!

**Galatians 3:10 (ESV) — 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."

And he writes:

**Romans 3:10 (ESV) — 10** as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;

Now it may be true that some of us have never broken a traffic law, (some of us do not drive) but it is certainly and absolutely true that every one has broken every one of God's commandments. Now you may ask, if no one can keep the law and if it is a curse, isn't the law then - bad? In that case isn't there something wrong with the law?

**Ecclesiastes 7:15–20 (ESV) — 15** In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. **16** Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? **17** Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? **18** It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. **19** Wisdom gives strength to the wise

man more than ten rulers who are in a city. **20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.**

Is there something wrong with the law if no one can keep it? The Westminster Confession of Faith helps us toward the answer to questions such as this. In chapter 19 we read that the law of God benefits us in four ways, **(1) it provides us with a perfect rule of righteousness, (2) it teaches us the will of God, (3) it serves us as a restraint to evil, and (4) in sweetly complying with the grace of the gospel it directs us as a teacher to the cross of Christ.** With benefits such as these in view we can hardly maintain that the law is bad or that there is something wrong with the law. In fact there is nothing wrong with the law of God, the curse of the law centers upon ourselves. We will not keep the law therefore we do not appropriate the great blessings of it.

To the contrary, the Psalmist speaks of the blessings of the law when he writes concerning those who delight in the law of YAHWEH and meditate day and night on the Torah,

**Psalm 1:3 (ESV) — 3** He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

**Psalm 119:1–2 (ESV) — 1** Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! **2** Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,

The Law of God provides us with a rule for life, the will of God, the restraint of evil, and direction leading to salvation. **It does not, however, produce righteousness in mankind.** People are foolish indeed to believe that the fruits of faith come by keeping the law as did the Galatian church. Paul writes,

**Galatians 1:6 (ESV) — 6** I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

**Galatians 2:3–4 (ESV) — 3** But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. **4** Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—

**Galatians 2:16 (ESV) — 16** yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in

Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Indeed, the Galatian church had this problem. They believed that by means of their circumcision, they were saved. In our day many hold the view that our baptism saves us. I once asked an engineering associate of mine if he believed he was saved. He said "yes". Then I asked him how he knew he was saved. His reply was, "I have been baptized". This opinion pertains not only to circumcision or baptism but to all of God's law. Many believe that if they are moral, or that if they are good citizens or that if they do good to their fellow man, they will be saved. Paul reminds us, however, that Titus, his fellow evangelist, was not compelled to be circumcised even though he was a Greek and not Jewish. It was not necessary for Titus to be circumcised in order to be saved. We can't seem to overcome our obsession to do some good work or exact some penance upon ourselves in order to be saved.

In Paul's day a Pharisee was the epitome of righteousness. If anyone was saved surely it was a member of the Pharisees and Paul himself was such a man. He writes, "If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more; circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." (Philippians 3:4-6)

**Philippians 3:4-6 (ESV) — 4** --- If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Listen to the proud Pharisee standing in a public place as he prays:

**Luke 18:11-12 (ESV) — 11** The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

This was the attitude of the Galatian church to whom Paul writes, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Does He then who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles

among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? While Peter was preaching to the 'Uncircumcised' Roman, Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell upon him and all who were with him. So that the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, "because the gift of God had been poured out upon the Gentiles also." (Acts 10:43-46)

Therefore we must conclude with Paul, "That a man is not justified by the works of the Law (circumcision or baptism) but through faith in Christ Jesus." I am afraid that we are much like the Galatians in that we often lose sight of the relationship between the Law and faith. We are not saved by virtue of our membership in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church or any other church. We are not saved because we have grown up in this church and like our parents before us answered the questions of membership. **We are saved only by "hearing with faith." The Law, therefore, does not produce righteousness us.**

In fact, righteousness only comes by imputation through faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned (imputed) to him as righteousness." It is by faith that we are sons of Abraham, not by works. Abraham himself was not saved by works, as many believe, but by faith. In verse 8 of our text we read of the extraordinary fact that the gospel was preached to Abraham and that this gospel consisted in God's statement that "All the nations shall be blessed in you." How is it that the nations are blessed in Abraham? Certainly not by Abraham's good works, "for if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God." (Romans 4:2) How is it that the nations are blessed by the gospel preached to Abraham? They are blessed, says Paul, because they share in the faith with Abraham the believer.

So far as the Law is concerned, mankind are cursed by their inability to keep it. **By faith they are blessed but by the law they are cursed.** Those who rest in the law for salvation are cursed because they can't keep it. Just like the traffic sign we did not see, we sin externally and internally by acts of commission and omission.

**Galatians 3:11 (ESV) — 11** Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for **"The righteous shall live by faith."**

**Galatians 3:26 (ESV) — 26** for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, **through faith.**

Paul concludes therefore, that it is obvious that we are saved by faith and not by works, "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is

evident; for "The righteous man shall live by faith." And, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." (verse 26) We are saved by faith in Messiah Jesus not by acceptable social behavior as the modern liberal would contend. Nor does it help us to define sin as "willful transgression" because ignorant transgression is still sin and on the other hand no one by an act of the will, is perfect. One cannot attain to perfection that way, rather we are made perfect by virtue of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.

Thus far in the text we have seen two errors which we should avoid. The first is supposing that the Law of God is faulty or bad because we cannot and will not keep it, and the second is supposing that we are righteous persons because we keep the Law of God. The great and foremost commandment of the Law according to Jesus is, "You shall love YAHWEH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37) Do we really love God in this manner? When we understand that love for God in the biblical sense is based on keeping His commandments, His Law, then we must answer with an emphatic no! No we do not love YAHWEH with all our heart, soul and mind. Neither do we love our neighbor as we ought, because love for our neighbor, in the biblical sense, is also based on the Law of God. It is certainly evident, as Paul writes, that "no one is justified by the law before God." **If we cannot or will not keep the Law of God and if we are not made righteous by it, what then is its purpose?** Of what value is the Law of God to us?

According to our text in Galatians chapter 3 the Law of God serves a high and holy purpose. In the first place, it provides us with rules for living in a manner pleasing to God. It guides and informs our whole world and life view. Let us take account of verses 12 through 14.

**Galatians 3:12–14 (ESV) — 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.

But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Here Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 which reads,

**Leviticus 18:5 (ESV) — 5** You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (YAHWEH)

Continuing with Galatians 3:13, 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”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith

By speaking of hanging on a tree, Paul make use of Deuteronomy 21:22-23

**Deuteronomy 21:22–23 (ESV) — 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.

Notice the plurals in Leviticus 18:5, "My statutes" and "My rules".

**Leviticus 18:5 (ESV) — 5** You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (YAHWEH)

It isn't just the issue of circumcision that is in view here but all of God's statutes and rules. These teach us the will of God for our manner of living.

God's Law is good for all mankind everywhere and for all time. Spiritual strength, vitality and prosperity flow from them. No, it isn't that we are made righteous by keeping them but we do please God and attain vitality in our relationship to God by making it our life goal to keep them. Paul tells us speaking of Jesus, that

**1 Peter 2:24 (ESV) — 24** He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

We are "redeemed from the curse of the Law" by Christ who became a curse for us. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed." **Christ died** that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles. **Christ died** that we might receive the Holy Spirit through faith. So we can see now just how great a blessing the Law of God is to us. **Because Christ died for us the Law is not a curse to us who believe in Christ.** It would be a curse to seek our redemption in keeping the Law but praise God, Jesus kept the Law for us and redeemed us from its curse. Now we are to pattern our lives after the commandments and judgements of God in order to please Him and to live as strong, vital Christians. Surely the Law is not a curse but a blessing!

The Law of God then provides us with rules for living and for pleasing God but Paul goes on to say secondly that the Law does not do away with the promises of God. To the contrary, the Law works sweetly with the promises of God and leads us to Christ from whom we may obtain them. In Galatians 3:15-21, Paul argues that the Law was given to Moses some 430 years after the time of Abraham to whom He gave the great covenantal promises. God promised to Abraham, "to be God to you and to your seed after you." (Genesis 17:7) As Paul notes in verse 16, this promise was made to the seed singular as opposed to seeds plural. The word "seed" (zaragh) of course can be taken as a collective noun meaning "descendants" or as a singular noun meaning "descendant".

The meaning of Paul's argument in verse 16 is that **God's promise of saving grace was made to Jesus as the federal representative of His church.** In that sense, the promise of redemption from the curse of the law was given directly to Christ and implicitly in a collective sense to the believers whom Christ represents. Thus the promise is a great and binding promise which cannot and will not be revoked or superseded. It is rather like a will which cannot be tampered with after the will is ratified and effective.

Furthermore, this promise was made long before the Law was given so, as Paul argues, the Law cannot invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God. Therefore the Law cannot be contrary to the promises of God, may it never be!

**Galatians 3:21–22 (ESV) — 21** Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. **22** But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So then, the Law serves the high and holy purpose of providing rules for living a life pleasing to God. And it is consistent with the promises of God in that it does not nullify the promises but in fact serves to lead us into the benefits of the covenant of grace. The Law brings us to our knees before the cross of Christ, and what a great blessing this is! The gracious Law that leads us to the Saviour is never a burden.

"Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith." Has the Law of God become your schoolmaster? Have you come to Christ for salvation? Have you confessed your sin, your breaking of God's commandments and judgments? Have you made it your life goal to please God by loving His Law and striving to keep it?



"The law of God is good and wise  
And sets his will before our eyes,  
Shows us the way of righteousness,  
And dooms to death when we transgress  
To Jesus we for refuge flee,  
Who from the curse has set us free,  
And humbly worship at his throne,  
Saved by his grace through faith alone.

NTH Hymn 150 (Psalm 19:8)

**Psalm 19:8 (ESV)** — **8** the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;