

Sermon: The Curse of the Law and the Cross of Christ (Galatians 3:10-14)¹

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FOR THE LAST two weeks, I've found my thoughts centering on Phil 3:1-11. It is, perhaps, easy to imagine what first would have drawn me to this text, as the argument in those verses reflects so much of what we've seen in Galatians.

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What has stuck in my head for the last two weeks, though, has not been the precise argument that Paul makes in Phil 3:1-11. Rather, what I have been reminded of again and again is something Paul wrote as he was introducing the argument of those verses, namely, "To write the

same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you."

Paul knew, as he was writing to the Philippians, that what he was about to write was nothing that he hadn't said to them again and again, day after day, week after week. However, it was no trouble for him, and more than that, he knew it was safe for them. Just this week, though, I sat in my office, studying these verses and thinking, "The problem

is not that saying the same things is trouble to me. I fear that if I'm saying the same thing again and again it would be trouble for you." How do I keep you from saying to yourselves, "Yes, we know that already?"

Then, I picked up Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, and I turned to the section of letters written to the "perplexed and doubting" (for obvious reasons). And I read the first letter in a section where Luther writes to a man who had come out of Roman Catholicism as he had seen the truth that man is justified by faith alone and not by some sort of mixture of faith and works. As Luther writes this letter, he sees that the man is being pressed by those who still hold to the false teaching from which he had been trying to break away. Therefore, Luther writes to him about those pressing him, "They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. Among us you were one who held this opinion, or rather, error." Then, he adds, "So was I, and I am still fighting against the error without

having conquered it yet.”²

And in that moment, it hit me afresh why we need to be reminded again and again of this truth that we are justified by faith alone. It is because even though we may hear this truth a thousand times, we are all prone to slip back into a false teaching that says we are righteous before God and approved by him because of our good works. We’re no different than the Philippians, than Luther, or the Galatians. We are all prone to confess justification by faith alone with our mouths and then live as if we are justified by works.

That’s what Paul was saying in Phil 3:1. If you take his statement that it is safe for them to hear this message again and state the same thing negatively, we feel perhaps a bit more strongly what Paul was saying to them, namely, “If I do not say this same thing to you, reminding you again that we are justified by faith alone and not by doing the commands that the law, then that would be dangerous for you.”

The reason it’s dangerous not to hear the truth that we’re justified by faith and not by works is because so many of us are prone to legalism. We’ve lived as if we were justified by works for years. And we’re good at living that way.

One of the most impressive feats in the history of NASA came during the Apollo 13 space mission. Multiple issues were going on that threatened the safe return of the crew, but one of them was that the carbon dioxide levels were rising, and the engineers at NASA had to come up with a way to put together a unit that would help funnel the carbon dioxide out of the shuttle. The only problem was that the crew on Apollo 13 itself was very limited. Ultimately, however, using moon rock plastic bags, cardboard, suit hoses, and duct tape, the engineers assembled something that would do the trick. They relayed it to the space crew, and soon the carbon dioxide levels lowered.³

But I don’t think those NASA engineers exhibited any more craftiness than many of us do when we continue to live as if we’re justified by the works of the law. Sure, we may sit and hear sermon after sermon through Galatians and feel as if the means

by which we think we are justified by the law are removed, but at the end of the day, we find ways to live as if our justification, our approval before God, is dependent upon our good works. We tell ourselves that the message we’ve been hearing for the last few weeks is true, but then we come up with ways to make our lives and our specific situations exceptions. We acknowledge that we’re justified through faith but still live as if we’re second-class citizens among the people of God until we can go through a good long period of time where our holy living lets us believe we’re really forgiven. Some of us even want others to know that we still haven’t forgiven ourselves for things we’ve done because that feels like it carries a sense of holiness or personal responsibility with it. Some of us even encourage others to walk around with a feeling of condemnation and not with the freedom that the gospel gives, enslaving our brothers and sisters because we feel that this is how we can communicate to them that we want to fight for their holiness. All of that is living as if we are justified by our works.

Some even hear me say that and respond, “Well, sure, we’re justified by faith, but now we’re talking about holy living, about sanctification.” So, I will remind you that Paul doesn’t ignore sanctification. Remember in 3:1-9 how Paul forced the Galatians to remember when they first received the Spirit? He was dealing then with the point of their justification. They had gone from enemies of God to those who desired to obey God not because they had obeyed the law but because they saw their wickedness, placed their faith in the crucified and risen Christ, were given the Spirit, and then the Spirit produced in them a desire for holiness unlike they had ever known. Then, Paul asked them, “Are you so foolish, having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” That is, do you think that the means by which a desire for holiness at the point of your justification is no longer a sufficient means to produce a desire for holiness in you now? Again, if it’s a desire for holiness that we’re worried about, then Paul tells us that such a desire comes as we have faith in the gospel and the Spirit produces it in us.

Let us not be found trying to be wiser than God.

So, as I considered all of these issues, I realized the weight of Paul's claim that it's dangerous for us not to be reminded again and again that we're justified by faith alone. But it's not just dangerous for us to forget that we are justified by faith. It is remarkably beneficial for us if we will truly grasp this beautiful reality that we are justified by faith alone in the crucified and risen Christ and not based on our good works. I think this congregation would be remarkably changed if we would just grasp this truth deep in our hearts. I think our singing would be more joyful, our praying would be more fervent, our passion for evangelism would be higher, our love for one another would be deeper, and our obedience to the Lord's commands would be greater. And I say that because I truly believe that the greatest motivation for a people to devote themselves fully to the Lord is not found in putting a law on them that says, "If you don't do this, he'll stand as a condemning judge over you," but is found in allowing them to see the glory and beauty of the gospel and in reminding them that they are free from condemnation through faith in Christ and have no need to enslave themselves again.

Therefore, that has been my hope and my aim and the goal of my prayers as we've studied through this book, and that is my hope and aim and goal now. I want us to see, understand, and delight in the gospel and the freedom we have through it. That is why saying the same thing to you again is no trouble to me, and I believe it is safe and beneficial for all of us. I would dare say that if God would graciously grant us as a people a deeper understanding and delight in the reality that we are free from condemnation by faith in Christ alone, we would notice a difference in this church.

So, with that said I want us to look specifically this morning at Gal 3:10-14. In these verses, Paul continues to mount up his arguments for why no man is justified by doing the works of the law but rather is only justified as he places his faith in Christ. He continues to show the absurdity of what the Galatians were being tempted to believe,

namely, that we have to combine obedience to the law's commands with our faith in order to be justified. Therefore, he gives them one more argument concerning the nature of the law, its incompatibility with faith, and a number of Old Testament references to convince his hearers again of the truth. So, I want us to look at these realities and see for ourselves the foolishness of thinking that we can be justified by doing good works.

Now, as we think about Paul's argument so far, you could imagine Paul's opponents saying, "Paul, you're right. Abraham was justified by faith, but then God brought along Moses and gave him the law. Therefore, the law is something God gave to add to faith. Just as God reveals more of his truth as redemptive history unfolds, so he showed us the necessity of faith for justification through Abraham and then showed us the necessity of obedience to (at least) much of what the law commands through Moses."⁴ Therefore, it is fitting for Paul to reveal the nature of the law, and he begins by reminding the Galatians that everyone who relies on the law in order to be justified is cursed because the law requires perfect obedience (v. 10).

EVERYONE WHO RELIES ON THE LAW TO BE JUSTIFIED IS CURSED BECAUSE THE LAW REQUIRES PERFECT OBEDIENCE (V. 10)

Paul writes in verse 10, "For all who rely on the 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 wants his readers to see that if anyone attempts to be justified according to the law, then they need to understand that the law requires perfect obedience. This is confirmed in James 2:10, as James writes, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." If you fail at one point in the law, you've broken the law and are condemned. We see the same reality concerning condemnation in the sin of Adam and Eve. They did not sin multiple times and so heap condemnation on themselves. They sinned once

and were condemned, driven from the garden.

But this reality is also clear in this verse itself. Paul says that those who rely on the works of the law for justification are under a curse because “cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them.” Do you see it in this verse? Paul quotes Deut 27:26, a section in Deuteronomy where God tells the people of blessings and curses, and reminds them that cursed is the man who does not do “all things” commanded in the law. That is, the law demands perfect obedience. Otherwise, the one under the law is cursed.

Of course, the unspoken implication in this verse is that no one perfectly keeps the law. No one abides by everything that is written in the law and obeys perfectly. Paul has confirmed this elsewhere, reminding us in Rom 3:10 and following that there is none righteous and that all of us have sinned. That’s universal.

Therefore, what Paul wants us to see is that if we’re thinking about being justified based on being good enough, based on obeying God’s commands in his law, then we need to realize that God requires absolute perfect obedience. In fact, disobeying the law at any one point makes one cursed before God, with God’s condemnation bearing down on one at all times and in all places. God will accept nothing less than absolute perfect obedience to his commands, and anyone who falls short of that is cursed.

And this might come as an odd statement to make, but I think this point is one of the greatest weapons we have in the fight against legalism. I know well that the nature of temptation to sin is such that we are faced with lies. We become convinced that somehow it really will make the hurt we feel inside ease a bit if we’ll just gossip. We tell ourselves that giving into our lustful appetites will bring us lasting joy. And in those moments, it’s helpful to be able to remind ourselves of truth and identify the lie in this temptation. Well, I think one of the greatest truths of which we can remind ourselves when we’re faced with the enemy’s lies that say we need to do more good works before God approves of us

or that we need to do more before God will really forgive us is the truth that God requires absolutely perfect obedience before anyone will be justified in his sight. That way, when Satan tempts us to despair and tells us that God wants nothing to do with us, we can answer, “Yes, I would be hopeless even if I had not sinned in the ways I can think of today or this week because unless anyone obeys God’s commands perfectly, that one is cursed. That’s why my only hope is Christ.” Then, you can look to the gospel and be reminded that one has lived perfectly righteous for you.

So, first, Paul reminds us that anyone who looks to the works of the law to be justified stands under the curse of God because God requires perfect obedience to his commands, and everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Therefore, Paul concludes in verse 11 that no one is then justified by the law but only through faith.

NO ONE IS JUSTIFIED BY THE LAW BUT ONLY THROUGH FAITH (V. 11)

Now, this is nothing new as we’ve gone through this letter, but here we see it again. Paul writes in verse 11, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Paul states in verse 11 what he has already shown; no one will be justified before God by the law, and the reason is because God requires perfect obedience and no one obeys perfectly. However, he adds another reason here in verse 11. He quotes Hab 2:4, reminding them that even this Old Testament book proclaimed, “the righteous shall live by faith.”

Therefore, Paul is showing them that the Old Testament itself witnessed that our only hope of justification is through faith. Paul had already shown this with Abraham, quoting Gen 15:6, and reminding the Galatians that Abraham believed God and that God credited him as righteous. However, he adds Hab 2:4 as well.

Now, the situation in Habakkuk is one where the prophet predicts of a day when the Chaldeans will come and judge Judah as a divine punishment

for their sins. Therefore, the call for those in Judah is to trust in God, to have faith. The righteous ones will live by faith. And Habakkuk becomes the leading example of this, declaring in Hab 3:17-18 that though the fig tree does not blossom, the vines bear no fruit, and there be no herd in the stalls, yet he will rejoice in the Lord. He will trust. He will believe. The call to the righteous is to have faith.

Paul points to that reality in Habakkuk and shows the Galatians that no man was ever intended to be justified by doing the commands of the law but that the call has always been to place our faith in the Lord. That's how we're justified. That's how we have eternal life. So, the call to us is to believe the gospel, not to try to be justified by the works of the law.

But there's more. In verse 12 Paul shows just how incompatible these two realities are. And this is crucial because the false teachers were telling the Galatians that they had to exercise faith and supplement it with obedience to the law in order to be justified. Paul so far has said, "No," because the Old Testament says the righteous live by faith and that if you try to be justified by the law, you're required to keep and obey it perfectly, and thus the law brings nothing but a curse to those trying to be justified by it.

Now, Paul shows how being justified by faith and being justified by the works of the law cannot be combined by pointing out that the essential nature of the law is that of doing, not of faith.

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE LAW IS THAT OF DOING, NOT OF FAITH (V. 12)

So, if faith is saying, "I cannot do enough. I simply look in faith, in trust, to God, who must provide for me and do what I cannot do," the essential nature of the law is completely the opposite of that. Paul writes in verse 12, "But the law is not of faith, rather, 'The one who does them shall live by them.'"

Paul quotes Lev 18:5 to show that the nature of the law was built upon obedience in order to bring blessing. You do this and you're blessed. Do this, and you'll live. The essential nature of the law was

to make demands that must be met. It was about doing. Faith, however, is about trusting, about confessing our inability and failure and looking in hope to the Lord to do for us. Therefore, you can't mix these together. Lest anyone think that salvation is by faith and works of the law, Paul says, "No, it cannot happen. They are incompatible."

Therefore, to confess that you're justified by faith and still living as if you must do certain things for God to approve of you is mixing together two things that are the opposite. It is like professing that you think marital faithfulness is right and good while constantly committing adultery. This is beyond inconsistency or hypocrisy. It's trying to put two things together that by definition, by their essential nature, cannot be mixed. Justification by faith and justification by the law cannot both exist. Either you're justified by faith alone or on the basis of works. And Paul has made clear which of these is true.

"Fine," we might say, "if God requires perfect obedience or we're cursed, under his judgment so that we're justified by faith and not by the law (nor some mixture of faith and obedience to the law), then what are we having faith in? What are we trusting in as our hope to be freed from the curse of the law that we've brought on ourselves by failing to obey God perfectly?" The answer, Paul gives us is Christ and what he has done for us. Specifically, Paul reminds us in verse 13 that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by paying our penalty as our substitute.

CHRIST REDEEMED US FROM THE CURSE OF THE LAW BY PAYING OUR PENALTY AS OUR SUBSTITUTE (V. 13)

Paul writes in verse 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.'" Now, at this point, we could make a devastating error in our thinking. We might think that the gospel is the good news that though we come short of God's demand of perfect obedience to his commands and have brought a curse upon

ourselves in the very form of God's judgment and condemnation, that God has decided to lower his commands or overlook the curse we've earned or just take what we can offer as good enough. That is not the gospel. If that were the case, then there would have been no need for God the Son to take on flesh, live, die, and be raised for us.

The good news, rather, is that God still demands perfection and though we've merited his judgment, Christ lived perfectly righteous for us and bore the judgment our sins had merited. That's what Paul is saying in verse 13. The curse did not simply go away. God demonstrated his love for us not by somehow compromising his holiness and acting as if our sins had never happened or that we had not merited a curse, his judgment, and his wrath. Rather, he demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son to take the punishment that we deserved. That's what Paul is saying in Gal 3:13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. The amazing love of God is seen not in his ceasing to be holy and removing his wrath but in sending his Son so that he might appease God's wrath for us. That is the glory of God's love.

This is what we mean when we talk about penal substitutionary atonement. Christ paid our penalty for us, serving as our substitute, and so made atonement for our sins. And Paul illustrates this by quoting Deut 21:23, writing, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."

You see, once a criminal was killed, he would be placed on a tree, on a stake, a piece of wood so as to serve as an announcement that this one had been justly condemned. Being hanged on a tree was a sign that one had borne the curse of God in his death.⁵ So, Paul is saying that when Jesus was hanged on a tree (that is, crucified), it was a sign that he had borne the curse of God himself. Christ bore the punishment we had earned by our sin. He took it for us so that instead of being the objects of God's wrath, we might become the objects of God's love and forgiveness.

Now, for Paul, at one point, this had no doubt been a reason why he had rejected the notion that

Jesus was God's promised Savior, the Messiah. Jesus had clearly been condemned in death under the curse of God. Once the risen Christ appeared to him, however, Paul began to see that though Jesus died under the curse of God, it had nothing to do with Jesus deserving punishment. Rather, he had become a curse "for us." As Isaiah 53 tells us, "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.... The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:5-6). Jesus died, taking upon himself the curse that we deserved.

This means that God does not overlook your sin. All the sin that Satan brings to your mind to tell you that God will not forgive you or that he does not declare you righteous, Jesus paid the penalty for that sin. The reason you can be forgiven of your sin is not because God lovingly decided to ignore it. It's because he lovingly decided to send his Son to pay for it. So, we don't tell Satan that we have not sinned or are not deserving of judgment when he mounts his attacks against us. We simply tell him that Jesus paid for them.

Again, Luther is helpful here. He writes, "When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'⁶

That is good news. That's why we still have hope, though condemned by the law. You see, the law says, "Do this and you will live," but we must answer, "I can't, but I place my faith in one who has obeyed for me and one who has paid for my failures." Therefore, this isn't a call just to have faith in something. It's specifically a call to place your faith in Christ and his life, death, and resurrection as being sufficient for your righteousness, sufficient for payment for your sins before a holy God.

Therefore, Paul has shown us why the law is a hopeless route for justification—it requires per-

fect obedience and we cannot offer that. Therefore, we are simply cursed under the law. He shows us why faith is necessary, namely, because the Scriptures have always taught that righteousness comes through faith. He shows us why the law and faith are incompatible. And he shows us why faith can justify—because our faith is in one who has lived, died, and been raised for us. But he doesn't stop there. Finally, he shows us that not only are we justified by faith, but God gives us the Holy Spirit, a demonstration that the blessing of Abraham has come to us.

THEREFORE, IF WE BELIEVE, WE RECEIVE ABRAHAM'S BLESSING – THE HOLY SPIRIT (V. 14)

The Galatians were no doubt being told that if their faith in Christ merited them anything, it most definitely did not make them blessed as Abraham's offspring. For that, they had to be circumcised. And, it's true that God did promise to bless Abraham and his offspring. Ultimately Paul even remarks that Abraham is an heir of the whole world (Rom 4:13). So then who gets the blessing promised to Abraham? Is it those who are circumcised or those who obey parts of the law?

Paul writes that those who have faith in Christ receive the promise given to Abraham. He writes in verse 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." As we believe, we receive the Holy Spirit, and that is a sure sign that we will be blessed with Abraham, that we are children of God.

Therefore, I know that the temptation is to turn to our obedience in order to think of ourselves as righteous before God. But fight that temptation, see the nature of the law and the nature of Christ's work, and know that faith is the only means by which to be justified before God. In essence, I want to encourage you to be aware enough of your sin to know that there is no hope of looking to your works to merit a right standing before God, and I want you to be constantly aware of the gospel so that you may

be reminded daily that you are free from condemnation because of what Christ has done for you.

ENDNOTES

¹This is a slight revision of a sermon originally preached on October 25, 2009, at Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, Tennessee.

²Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (The Library of Christian Classics; vol. 28; ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 110.

³This story is provided at <http://history.nasa.gov/alsj/a13/a13.summary.html>.

⁴Timothy George similarly writes, "At this point Paul's Galatian opponents could well chime in: 'Of course! That's just what we've been saying all along. The history of salvation does not run from Abraham to Christ but from Abraham through Moses to Christ. The way for the Gentiles to receive the blessings of Abraham is by way of the law. The law is not opposed to faith but rather supplements and strengthens it by making demands of it'" (*Galatians* [New American Commentary; Nashville: B&H, 1994], 228).

⁵Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 285.

⁶Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 86-87.