

<read text: Galatians 3:23-29>

To fully appreciate what Paul is saying here, we need to look back a few weeks and remember the context of why he had to write the letter to the Galatians. If you recall, unlike many of Paul's letters which were mostly encouragement and some helpful advice for troubles that the congregations might be facing, the letter to the Galatians was written because there were some serious, dangerous, issues cropping up in the middle of the congregations. There were those in the midst of the believers trying to convince them that the gospel they had heard wasn't the full truth. It really wasn't enough to just believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, that was just the start; the whole story was that you had to then follow the entire covenant law that God gave on Mount Sinai.

The group that tried to force this mindset on the faithful had a mistaken notion about the place the Mosaic law was meant to hold. And that's what Paul is talking about here. He's trying to demonstrate to those who've been hoodwinked by this (and even to those who promoted this false idea) what the intent and function of that law was. The law was not meant to be something that they should be returning to, it was something that held people prisoner until they were set free in faith. You don't go intentionally running back to your jailer! It would be foolishness.

In fact, Paul paints the picture in a very clear way in the next passage to show the Jews exactly what the intent of the law was. Here he says that the law was "put in charge" until Christ came. In fact, the original word in the Greek for "put in charge" carries a closer translation of "tutor". And now this isn't "tutor" in the sense of someone who helps you with your math homework, the function in society was different then. This was an adult servant of sorts assigned to a particular youth who was in charge of keeping that child out of trouble. He was to monitor the child's behavior and make sure the child was where and doing what he ought to be doing.

And in a larger sense, that is exactly the function the Mosaic law was set to fulfill. God had given a promise to Abraham, that his offspring would grow into a large nation and that through that nation would come one that would bless *all* nations. But when the promise was given to Abraham the time wasn't right for that savior to come. And some four hundred years later, when Abraham's offspring had grown into a large nation, the time still wasn't right for the savior to come. The nation would have to hold on to God and wait. The problem was that the nation was made of human beings. Human beings that are, by nature, rebellious and obstinate when it comes to God. And so God had to take special means to make sure that this nation in particular held on to a thread of the true faith throughout the intervening years until the Messiah did arrive. This was the Mosaic law.

The law was designed to carefully guard every aspect of the Israelite life, it was designed to watch over them, hold them to a strict way of life and in doing so, keep them from straying to the false religions surrounding them all. It was an overseer, a "tutor" designed to keep them on the straight and narrow and out of trouble. But a tutor was only for children, only until they grew up enough to be a responsible, self-determining adult. Now, as you and I well know, being an adult doesn't mean you stop getting in trouble either, but you're expected to be able to make those decisions and be responsible for the outcomes. And as Paul says here, the law was put in charge *until Christ came*.

With the coming of Christ, the law was no longer needed. The law was in place to hold an entire nation close to God until the Messiah came. Now that he had come, there was no need for that any longer. People were to be treated like individuals now, like adults, expected to each be responsible for themselves. The Mosaic law had served its purpose, it was fulfilled by Christ, and to try to return to it missed the point. It was trying to act like children when God wanted adults.

Now, you and I have never been under the Mosaic law, so up to this point, you may be thinking a big "so what?". But even though it wasn't really what Paul was writing about, in a way much of what he says applies to us and God's universal law. There are a few differences of course, the Mosaic law was given for a short period of history to a specific nation. God's universal law has always existed and continues to exist. It is intended for everyone. You and I were born under this law. Unlike the Law of Moses, this law is not an extensive written law with odd stipulations. Rather this law can be summed up in a sentence or expounded upon over a thousand pages. It is God's universal law of selfless love. Complete love and devotion to God himself, and equal love for those around us as ourselves.

And like the law given to the Israelites, it exists, at times, to browbeat us into obedience. To keep us, even in the depths of unbelief, from giving in to the worst the world has to offer us. It doesn't always work, but it's a curb. It tries to keep us from straying too far, but like a curb, you can jump it if you really try. But like the law given to Moses, in a way, this is only meant as a temporary measure.

Because God's universal law fulfills another function for us that also worked on the Israelites just the same. It exists to hold before us a promise that we can never reach. "Obey this law" says God, "and I will reward you. Ignore it, fail it, and I will destroy you." The challenge is made, the gauntlet thrown and the human spirit rises to meet it. A person tries. Tries so hard. And if you don't scrutinize too close, it can almost seem like it's possible. But God demands more than just outward actions and rote obedience. He demands a heart that truly cares about others, he demands a devotion to him that has never allowed anything else to get in the way. A life that has only ever sought contentment in him, only ever taken joy in him. And we...we have put our own wants in front of our neighbors' needs. We have looked to the strength of our own hands and the skill of our own minds and given thanks to them for the joys we have in this life.

The promise the law offers is never meant to save, it exists to show we cannot save ourselves. Whenever we try to rise up, try to take some pride in ourselves, the law is there to beat us down, show us that our pride is unfounded and we have no reason to have any confidence in ourselves, what we've done or what we've acquired. It is there, most importantly, to create in us an understanding, a feeling of deep need for something more than ourselves, something that we must have but cannot provide for ourselves. The law cannot show us how this is fixed, it can only ever create the need in us.

Christ came to Israel when the time was right, and changed everything for the Israelites. The law they knew ceased to be in effect through him. When the time was right for each of us, Christ came to us, showed us each the way he would fill our deepest need and changed the way the law works for each of us. He has brought us into adulthood before God, fully grown and responsible for ourselves. The tutor of the law has no authority over us any longer. Now, this does not mean we go about doing whatever we want all willy-nilly. That is not how adults are expected to act. So long as we are in Christ, the law is no longer over us. But so long as we are a new creation in Christ, we do the things the universal law of God requires, not because we want a reward or because we will be punished if we do not. We do what the law of God asks because it asks us to love, and that is what we are in Christ, a spirit of love for God and each other. It is not done out of obligation, it is done because it is who we are.

And as Paul goes on to elaborate here, as full grown adults in Christ, we have other privileges to enjoy in this status. **"We are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,"** he states. Not that we are all male in God (and that's proven further on here), but that we all have the *status* of sons as it was understood in the ancient world. Being an adult son was roughly the highest status one could have in a household without being the master. You were free and you had a promised share of the inheritance, and in this case, the inheritance of God.

As Paul points out here, at our baptism we were clothed with Christ himself. He lived the law for us, he was the perfect, obedient son. We are the rebellious children, but we have been accepted into the family because we are covered with Christ. The Father looks at us and through the washing and rebirth of baptism he sees his perfect son in each one of us, a perfection that allows us to be full heirs in his family. There are no divisions in the family of how this will be distributed. There are none of better or lower status.

To make this clear, that we are all together one in this, Paul brings out the three main divisions that occupied the Jewish mind and tells us that they simply don't matter when it comes to being an heir of God. There is not Jew or Greek, not one better because God spoke to their nation and not the other. God wants all nations to be saved. There is not slave nor free. God does not consider some his indentured servants and others family, we are all family. And there is neither male nor female, gender does not affect whether you will receive an inheritance, it is given equally to all who are in the family. (Please note that Paul is not contradicting himself or God regarding the *roles* of men and women, he's strictly speaking to our equality in inheriting from our God).

And what is the inheritance? It's the inheritance of Abraham. All of us who have been made alive and alike in Christ have been made part of the promise to Abraham and even back to Adam and Eve before that. That we will be blessed by our God, rescued from this world and brought to an eternal kingdom together. And this is how we should see each other and ourselves. Strip away all the societal conventions that get in the way. Take away the status of family or wealth or career, the stigma of past life or prior association. It's all gone in ourselves and each other as we stand before God equally. The only thing that matters is our status in Christ. In him we are grown adults, full heirs of the promise and responsible for ourselves. Don't give that up. Don't let anything get in the way. Don't be in a rush to return to a law that says you must do to be saved, because that is for children who are not mature enough to inherit. In Christ, we are full heirs of the promise of salvation, all together the same. Amen.