



Sunday Evening 3rd Feb 2019 Sermon Notes
Galatians 3 15-25 'Grace Centred'

Asking for Help

If you've been here with us looking at Galatians over the past few weeks we have been reminded over and over again that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by the works of Christ alone. There is nothing that we can do to earn our salvation, or earn acceptance from God. In fact there's nothing we can do or say that will make God love us more than he already does. This is wonderful, liberating stuff,

But it's also really hard for people to accept – because when it comes down to it, we like to be in charge and sort out our lives our way. So the moment we hear someone tell us that we need saving and we can't do it ourselves, it's a real challenge to our self reliance, our pride, our self sufficiency. The stumbling block for many is that of admitting their need of God.

I mean we don't like to ask for help at the best of times – that's why there's so many DIY decorating disasters around the UK – whether it's wonky wallpaper or half assembled IKEA wardrobes, the truth is we are not all cut out to be great with DIY. Some of us know we need help but just won't ask.

In a recent survey 29% people asked said they would rather drive back home when the sat nav gave wrong directions and they ended up getting lost, rather than ask a stranger for help and directions. We don't like to ask for help. Somehow it's seen as a weakness.

Now I'm all for having confidence in solving problems, being self reliant and just having a go. But there are times when we all need a little help and just have to ask. And if we have this much problem admitting our need for help with wardrobes and directions, how much more is it the case when it comes to admitting our need of God – if we even realise!

And admitting our need of God is so often misunderstood - that somehow it means those who do are weak, drippy people who walk through life somehow as victims who can't do anything ourselves. I think it's actually a position of great personal strength because we realise the limits of our self-sufficiency. A wise person knows when they need help. A Christian knows who they need to ask.

Acknowledging our need of God doesn't mean we can't be strong, forthright, influential innovators who take on the world with confidence and do great things. But what it does mean is not trying to do everything in our own strength and that at our heart– we carry a humility, a dying to self that says: 'I need you God'.

And that's what our passage today is about – helping people come to the realization of their need for God. And Paul talks around this as he looks at the ideas of grace and law.

Abraham and the Promise Received Through Faith

Today's passage very much flows from last week's where Paul talked of Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish nation. He said that Abraham received God's promise – remember his promise was that through Abraham and his seed all peoples would be blessed – he received that promise by faith alone, there was nothing he could do to make it happen except receive the promise and believe. In verse 16 of Chapter 3, Paul reminds us that this seed promised long ago was Jesus. Now contracts and covenants usually require commitment and actions from all parties – all have to sign and all face the consequences if the contract is broken.

But something different happens between God and Abraham in this case. We need to go to Genesis 15 to understand more about this promise. We join the story just after God has made his promise. Starting at v8.

But Abram said, "O Lord God, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?"

"God said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove, and a young pigeon."

Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other."

This may seem strange to us, but in Abraham's time this was how a covenant and binding contract was signed. They would take the animals, cut them in half, and create an aisle between them. Then, each covenant maker would walk through the animals. It was a very graphic way of saying "If I break this agreement, may I be cut up. I will deserve to die just like these animals did!" The incredible thing is, Abraham never passed through the animals, only God did!

In verse 12 we learn that Abraham falls into a deep sleep and in verse 17 'when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces' This strange fire is the presence of God. God alone passes through the animals.

Here's the point – God's promise that all nations will be blessed by Abraham, and through his seed– that covenant relies in no way on Abraham. He didn't have to sign up, to pass through the animals – because it's all on God. Abraham simply has to believe and receive, and God does the rest. Just like he does all these years later with us.

Paul argued, that what was true for Abraham, is true for the Galatians. They receive God's promise of Salvation through faith and faith alone.

Moses the Law Bringer

Now I imagine at this point in the reading of the letter. It's coffee break time and all the false teachers in Galatia gathering together, taking their mugs of tea into a corner and deciding how best to counteract the simplicity of Paul's arguments. Huddled off to one side formulating their come-back. And then after a few minutes turning back triumphant and saying:

“Yes we agree, Abraham did receive God’s promise through faith, but 430 years later through God’s esteemed servant Moses (someone we would want to give equal weight to) - through Moses God gave his people the law to follow.

The law came after the promises to Abraham, therefore in respect to both Abraham and Moses, we conclude we are now saved by faith and the law, it’s both - Otherwise what was the point of Moses turning up with the law? He might as well just stayed up the mountain. Surely you are not suggesting we just ignore it?

It’s a good question. So what is the point of the law? What is the point of the law given by Moses and outlined in the first 5 books of the Old Testament – the 242 things you have to do and the 365 things you mustn’t do, summarised in the 10 commandments, what is its purpose if it isn’t to do with salvation?

Well says Paul in today’s passage, it certainly wasn’t given to save us – verse 3.19 ‘it was added because of our transgressions’ The law was given to show people their transgressions or sins. It’s the ultimate reality check! The law shows us that because no one can obey it fully, no one is good enough to earn their salvation.

So Just like the cameras on the road that display your speed for everyone to see – especially embarrassing when you are going 34 in a 30 mile zone; just like the warning alarm at Sainsburys that goes off when you try to leave the shop with security tagged items by mistake of course; Just like the penalty flag held up by the assistant referee at a footy game; the law points out loud and clear that we are rule breakers. And that’s the problem, no matter how good we are, we are lawbreakers.

The Law as a Guard and Teacher

Paul then goes on to use two metaphors to explain this more fully in verses 23 and 24.

First he tells us in v23 the law is like a prison guard.

“before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed”

I was immediately reminded of Alcatraz – the island prison in San Francisco when I read this. Steph and I visited last September. And the utter bleakness of the place. Imagining prisoners under lock and key and the futility of that existence.

That says Paul, is what the law does. It shows us that we are prisoners of sin and helpless to free ourselves. It shows us that we need to be rescued. Because our freedom is removed

So the law is like a prison guard – then secondly in v24 he tells us the law is like a supervisor or tutor. The NIV translation doesn’t really draw this metaphor out very well:

“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law”

The law is our supervisor. In the homes in Paul's day, the tutor was usually the one who supervised the children on the parent's behalf. They were in authority over the child and all their activities. In both of these metaphors, the guard and the tutor remove our freedom. But the tutor image has more to it.

In 2018, a UK teacher won the 'Global teacher Prize' for the first time. Andria Zafirakou, who teaches art and textiles in a Brent secondary school, has won a prize worth \$1m (£720,000). Beating teachers nominated from more than 170 countries.

Speaking of the hardship and overcrowded housing conditions facing many of her pupils. She said 'too often we neglect the power of the educator to actually transform perspectives, particularly in the poorest communities. A good educator does so much more than just keep the status quo – a good educator helps you see where you are clearly and map out what is required to move on and up'

The Law says Paul is like a tutor, a good educator – it enables us to see where we are clearly (constrained by sin) – but also map out what is required to move on and up.
v24 'So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.'

So Galatians – that's what the law does – it's a guard. It's a teacher. It's the ultimate reality check. It tells us where we are – all lawbreakers unable to save ourselves. But it also points us in the direction of Jesus -and leads us to a place of humility. The place to accept the amazing grace Jesus offers.

Paul is continually turning our ears away from false messages of salvation by works, and back to the sweet message of grace. And that is the gift of the book of Galatians.