

Galatians 3:23-29

Heirs of the promise

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Over the years that I have preached here, I have always endeavoured to properly distinguish between law and gospel. It's a tough one because there are traps to fall into on either side of a narrow path. On the one side, we might totally dismiss the law, as if the gospel frees us to do whatever we want. The problem is, 'whatever we want' usually includes sin. But then we preach against sin and the gospel seems to disappear and it becomes all about our ability to keep the law. Keeping both in the picture and in their proper spots is a difficult task, but a very important one. We need to keep coming to back the true roles that both God's law and God's gospel play in the life of a Christian.

Firstly, God's law is a good thing. It is a gift from God, it teaches us how to live wisely, and guides us toward a life of fulfilment and contentment. It does also point out our transgressions, our failures to live as God would have us live. In Romans, St Paul describes God's law as holy, just, and good. In today's reading from Galatians, St Paul describes the law as a guardian. This is a difficult translation because we don't really have this role in our society anymore. St Paul is talking of a household servant responsible for the eldest son.

The role is a cross between a nanny, a private tutor, and a bodyguard. This household servant must protect the heir to the family estate, but also ensure they are raised well and educated well so that they may one day take their place as the head of the family. This guardian role prepares for a future where the household can continue to thrive because it is well led even as it passes from one generation to the next. They have the strictness of an old schoolmaster, one from back in the era when corporal punishment was still permitted. But the guardian was also a slave. He had no real standing in the household and would one day be subject to the very child he is now helping raise. This is a key point. The law as our guardian is not our Lord, it does not rule over us. In fact, in Christ, we rule over it.

Some of the other language we might use to describe God's law is that of a doctor diagnosing an illness. The law shows us that we are sick, that we are bound up in sin and need to be set free, cured of our sickness. The law drives us to find someone to cure us, and that someone is Christ, the great physician. Jesus is the one who has the cure, who himself is the cure.

While it's good for us in this life to live according to God's law, and it trains us well for life in God's kingdom, the law is only a servant to lead us to Jesus. God's law is good, but it's not the good news of salvation. God's law is just, but it doesn't justify us before our heavenly Father. God's law shows us how to live, but life, true and eternal life, is found in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, in his death and resurrection for our sake. The law can point toward goodness, justice, and peace, but it cannot create a peaceable, loving, and just people. The law of God truly does its job when it points us to Christ, or for some of us, drags us to Christ.

The Galatian church had lost sight of this. They had placed their hopes and futures in their ability to follow the law. They thought that through it they could become heirs of Abraham, and receivers of the promise, forgetting that in Christ they were already children of God. All who are baptised into Christ are heirs of the promises to Abraham. This takes us right back to Genesis 12 where God promises Abraham that all nations will be blessed through him, and also to Genesis 15, where God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

St Paul points back to these verses as evidence that God planned from the beginning to justify the Gentiles by faith. And so, then we get this wonderful, though occasionally misused statement from St Paul:

All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Our hope of salvation lies purely in our union with Christ. It doesn't depend on any other aspect of our identity, or in anything we might manage to do of our own accord.

In Christ, in our common baptism, these distinctions are reframed and play only a secondary role. They don't disappear, but they have no bearing on our salvation. The only thing that matters is that we are now children of God through faith. And through faith, we are heirs of the promise, receivers of the blessing that God promised to all nations through Abraham. And as children of God, we are no longer under the supervision of any guardian. We are free, grown-up, living in our true place as members of the household.

We are given great responsibility in representing God's household or God's kingdom in everything we do. We might sometimes need reminders of how members of the household live and act, and the great privilege we have as children of God. And we might sometimes need reminders that we didn't deserve the position we have.

This status as children of God, members of God's own family, and heirs of the promise to Abraham, was given to us on account of God's great love. And it was given through Jesus' death and resurrection and our being united into that through baptism. The good news of the gospel is that God has done all that for us and given us new life in his kingdom. The law then calls us to live out this new life, reflecting the values of the kingdom in all that we do. But never forgetting that it was God's grace that brought us into such a position in the first place.

Thanks be to God for the new life we have through Christ. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.