

Bible Study: Galatians 3:19–29

The Law, the Promise, and Our Identity in Christ

Main Idea

God's law reveals sin and prepares us for Christ, but it cannot save us. Through faith in Jesus Christ, believers are justified, adopted into God's family, united with one another, and made heirs of God's promise.

Introduction

Paul has argued that people are made right with God by faith and not by keeping the law.

This raises an important question:

“Why, then, was the law given?”

If God's promise to Abraham came before the law, and salvation has always been received by faith, what purpose did the law serve?

Paul's answer is not that the law was bad or unnecessary. The law had a real, God-given purpose. However, it was never intended to save sinners.

The law is not a ladder by which we climb to God. It is a mirror that shows us our sin and our need for Christ.

Galatians 3:19–29 explains:

1. Why God gave the law
 2. What the law can and cannot do
 3. How the law points us to Christ
 4. How faith changes our relationship with God
 5. How Christ gives believers a new identity
 6. How the gospel creates a new community
 7. How believers become heirs of God's promise
-

I. The Law Was Added Because of Sin

Galatians 3:19

“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.”

Paul anticipates the natural question of his readers. If God’s promise to Abraham was sufficient, why did God later give the law through Moses?

Paul answers that the law was “added because of transgressions.”

A. The Law Reveals Sin

The law identifies what sin is.

Human beings possess consciences, but our consciences may become confused, hardened, or shaped by the values of our culture.

God’s law gives us an objective standard of right and wrong.

Romans 3:20 says:

“Through the law we become conscious of our sin.”

The law is like a bright light turned on in a dirty room. The light did not create the dirt. It simply revealed what was already there.

B. The Law Exposes the Seriousness of Sin

Sin is not merely weakness, immaturity, or poor judgment.

Sin is transgression. It is crossing a boundary established by God.

The law shows that sin is rebellion against the character and authority of God.

It removes our excuses:

1. “I did not know.”
2. “Everyone else does it.”
3. “It did not seem that serious.”
4. “I am still better than most people.”

The law places every person under God’s righteous standard.

C. The Law Restrains Sin

Although the law cannot change the human heart, it can restrain outward evil.

Laws establish boundaries, provide consequences, and protect communities from chaos.

The law can command a thief not to steal, but it cannot remove greed from the thief's heart.

The law can forbid murder, but it cannot create love.

The law can condemn adultery, but it cannot produce faithfulness.

The law may restrain behavior, but only Christ can transform the heart.

D. The Law Had a Temporary Covenant Role

Paul says the law was added “until the Seed” came.

The “Seed” is Christ, as Paul explained in Galatians 3:16.

This does not mean that God's moral character changed or that holiness is no longer important.

It means that the Mosaic law served a temporary role in God's unfolding plan of redemption.

The law prepared Israel and the world for the coming of Jesus.

The law was not the final destination. It was a sign pointing toward the destination.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do people often resist clear moral standards?
2. How does God's law reveal things about us that we might prefer to ignore?
3. What is the difference between restraining sinful behavior and changing a sinful heart?
4. Why is it important to remember that the law was never intended to save?

Application

Ask God to reveal where you may have been renaming sin rather than confessing it.

Instead of saying:

- “I made a mistake,” consider whether you need to say, “I sinned.”
- “I have a temper,” consider whether you need to confess anger.
- “I am careful with money,” consider whether greed may be present.
- “I am just being honest,” consider whether your words are harsh or unloving.

The law helps us name our sin honestly so that we may bring it to Christ.

II. The Law Was Given Through a Mediator

Galatians 3:19–20

“The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.”

These are among the most difficult verses in Galatians.

Paul appears to contrast the way the law was given with the way the promise was given.

A. The Law Was Given Through Intermediaries

Jewish tradition associated angels with the giving of the law.

Moses also served as the mediator between God and Israel.

The people stood at a distance while Moses went up the mountain to meet with God.

The law came through a mediated arrangement involving:

1. God
2. Angels
3. Moses
4. Israel

B. The Promise Was Given Directly by God

By contrast, God gave the promise directly to Abraham.

The law involved covenant obligations between two parties.

Its structure was essentially:

“If you obey, blessing will follow.”

The promise to Abraham rested on God’s own faithfulness:

“I will bless you.”

The fulfillment of the promise ultimately depended on the one God who made it.

C. The Promise Is Secure Because God Is Faithful

Human failure cannot cancel divine faithfulness.

The promise does not rest on our ability to perform perfectly.

It rests on God's character and His commitment to fulfill what He has said.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between a promise that depends on human performance and one that depends on God's faithfulness?
2. Why is salvation more secure when it rests on God's promise rather than our performance?
3. How do people sometimes turn Christianity into a contract instead of receiving it as grace?

Application

Examine the way you relate to God.

Do you tend to think:

1. "If I perform well, God will love me."
2. "If I fail, God will abandon me."
3. "If I do enough good things, God will owe me."
4. "If life is difficult, God must be displeased with me."

The gospel does not teach that obedience is unimportant.

It teaches that obedience is the result of grace, not the price of grace.

We do not obey so that God will make us His children. We obey because, through Christ, He has made us His children.

III. The Law Does Not Oppose God's Promise

Galatians 3:21

"Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!"

Paul refuses to create a conflict between God's law and God's promise.

Both came from God.

Both are good.

They simply serve different purposes.

A. The Law and the Promise Have Different Functions

The law reveals God's righteous standard.

The promise reveals God's gracious provision.

The law shows us what righteousness requires.

The promise gives us righteousness through faith in Christ.

B. The Problem Is Not the Law

The problem is not that the law is bad.

The problem is that sinful humanity is unable to keep it perfectly.

The law is good, but it cannot overcome the sinful condition of the human heart.

C. The Law Cannot Give Life

Paul writes:

“For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.”

The law can command life, but it cannot impart life.

It can describe righteousness, but it cannot produce righteousness within us.

Consider several illustrations:

1. A speed-limit sign can tell you how fast to drive, but it cannot press the brake pedal for you.
2. A medical diagnosis can identify a disease, but the diagnosis is not the cure.
3. A mirror can show dirt on your face, but you do not wash your face with the mirror.

The law diagnoses our condition. Christ provides the cure.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important not to treat the law as something bad?
2. What is the difference between commanding righteousness and producing righteousness?
3. What are some ways people try to use religion to create spiritual life?
4. Why can rules change outward behavior without changing the heart?

Application

Do not confuse biblical knowledge with spiritual transformation.

It is possible to know:

1. The Ten Commandments
2. Bible stories
3. Christian doctrine
4. Church traditions
5. Proper religious language

A person may know all these things and still lack spiritual life.

Ask yourself:

“Am I merely informed about Christianity, or have I personally trusted Christ?”

Biblical knowledge is valuable, but that knowledge must lead us to the Savior.

IV. Scripture Places Everyone Under Sin

Galatians 3:22

“But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.”

Paul describes humanity as imprisoned under the power of sin.

A. Sin Is More Than an Occasional Bad Choice

Apart from Christ, sin is a ruling power.

Sin affects:

1. The mind
2. The desires
3. The will
4. Relationships
5. Attitudes
6. Behavior

Humanity does not merely commit sins. Humanity exists under the power and condemnation of sin.

B. Scripture Declares Everyone Guilty

Scripture “locks up” everyone under sin by declaring the universal guilt of humanity.

No one escapes:

1. The religious person is under sin.
2. The irreligious person is under sin.
3. The moral person is under sin.
4. The immoral person is under sin.
5. The law-abiding citizen is under sin.
6. The convicted criminal is under sin.

Romans 3:23 says:

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

C. The Universal Verdict Has a Gracious Purpose

Paul says this happened:

“So that what was promised...might be given to those who believe.”

God closes every door of self-salvation so that the door of grace remains open.

The law removes confidence in ourselves so that we may place our confidence in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it difficult for people to accept that everyone is under sin?
2. How can religious people hide from the truth of their own sinfulness?
3. Why is the doctrine of universal sin necessary for understanding grace?
4. How should recognizing our shared need for mercy affect the way we treat others?

Application

Stop comparing yourself with other people.

The question is not:

“Am I better than someone else?”

The real question is:

“Have I perfectly reflected the holiness, love, truth, and righteousness of God?”

Comparison usually produces one of two results:

1. Pride, because we believe we are better than others.
2. Despair, because we believe others are better than us.

The gospel produces both humility and hope.

We are more sinful than we like to admit, but in Christ we are more loved than we could imagine.

V. The Law Served as a Guardian Until Christ

Galatians 3:23–25

“Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.”

Paul describes the law as keeping people “in custody.”

He continues:

“So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.”

A. The Meaning of “Guardian”

The word translated “guardian” referred to a trusted household servant who supervised a child.

The guardian was responsible for:

1. Discipline

2. Protection
3. Supervision
4. Guidance
5. Escorting the child to school

The guardian served only until the child reached maturity.

B. The Law Functioned as a Guardian

The law supervised God's people.

It:

1. Established boundaries
2. Exposed wrongdoing
3. Provided discipline
4. Separated Israel from surrounding nations
5. Prepared the people for Christ

C. The Law Pointed Beyond Itself

The various elements of the law pointed forward to Jesus.

1. The sacrifices pointed to a final sacrifice.
2. The priests pointed to a perfect High Priest.
3. The tabernacle pointed to God dwelling among His people.
4. The cleansing ceremonies pointed to humanity's need for spiritual cleansing.
5. The Day of Atonement pointed to the need for a complete atonement for sin.

The law continually declared:

"You need cleansing."

"You need atonement."

"You need a mediator."

"You need a sacrifice."

"You need a Savior."

D. Christ Fulfilled the Guardian's Purpose

Now that Christ has come, believers are no longer under the law as their covenant guardian.

This does not mean that Christians are free to sin.

It means that believers no longer live under the Mosaic law as the covenant system governing the people of God.

Christ fulfilled the law.

Believers are justified by faith.

The law can lead us into the courtroom, but only Christ can declare us righteous.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways did the law prepare people for Christ?
2. How did the sacrifices, priests, and ceremonies point beyond themselves?
3. What does it mean to be justified by faith?
4. Why does freedom from the law's guardianship not mean freedom to sin?

Application

Use the law as a signpost pointing you to Christ.

1. When the law reveals greed, look to Christ, who became poor for us.
2. When the law reveals lust, look to Christ, who was perfectly pure.
3. When the law reveals anger, look to Christ, who was righteous and compassionate.
4. When the law reveals pride, look to Christ, who humbled Himself.
5. When the law reveals guilt, look to Christ, who bore our condemnation.

Do not merely stare at your failure.

Follow the direction of the law toward the Savior.

VI. Through Faith We Become Children of God

Galatians 3:26

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

Paul moves from the courtroom into the family room.

A. Justification Changes Our Legal Standing

Justification means that God declares believers righteous through faith in Christ.

Our guilt is removed.

The righteousness of Christ is credited to us.

B. Adoption Changes Our Family Standing

Adoption means that God receives believers as His children.

The gospel does not merely cancel our debt.

It brings us into God's family.

C. Our New Status Is Found in Christ

Notice Paul's phrases:

1. "In Christ Jesus"
2. "Through faith"

We do not become God's children through religious achievement.

We become God's adopted children through faith and union with Christ.

Jesus is the eternal Son of God by nature.

Believers become sons and daughters of God by grace.

D. Believers May Know God as Father

Christians do not relate to God merely as:

1. Judge
2. Lawgiver
3. Creator
4. Ruler
5. King

Through Christ, believers may also know Him as Father.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between forgiveness and adoption?
2. Why is adoption one of the greatest blessings of salvation?
3. How might your prayer life change if you truly believed that God receives you as His child?
4. How does being a child of God provide security during failure or suffering?

Application

Approach God as your Father.

You do not have to impress Him with religious language.

You do not have to hide your weakness.

You do not have to earn access to His presence.

Because of Christ, believers may come honestly and confidently.

Pray:

“Father, I come to You not because I have performed well, but because Christ has brought me near.”

VII. Believers Are Clothed with Christ

Galatians 3:27

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Baptism is the public sign of a believer’s identification with Jesus Christ.

A. Baptism Portrays Union with Christ

Paul is not teaching that the physical act of baptism automatically saves.

Throughout Galatians, he insists that justification comes through faith.

Baptism visibly portrays the believer’s union with Christ.

The believer identifies with:

1. Christ’s death

2. Christ's burial
3. Christ's resurrection
4. Christ's people
5. Christ's lordship

B. Believers Have “Put On” Christ

Paul says believers have “clothed” themselves with Christ.

Clothing:

1. Covers us
2. Identifies us
3. Is visible to others
4. Often communicates belonging or status

To be clothed with Christ means that our deepest identity is found in Him.

C. Our Old Identities No Longer Define Us

Our deepest identity is no longer determined by:

1. Our past
2. Our achievements
3. Our failures
4. Our social standing
5. Our reputation
6. Our family background
7. The opinions of others

God sees believers as united with His Son.

D. The Character of Christ Should Become Visible

Being clothed with Christ also means that His character should increasingly be seen in us.

Believers are to display:

1. His compassion
2. His humility
3. His purity
4. His patience
5. His love
6. His truthfulness
7. His grace

Discussion Questions

1. What does baptism publicly communicate?
2. What does it mean to find our identity in Christ?
3. What other identities are people tempted to place above their identity in Jesus?
4. What aspects of Christ's character should become more visible in believers?

Application

Ask yourself:

“What am I wearing as my primary identity?”

People may clothe themselves in:

1. Career
2. Political identity
3. Family reputation
4. Wealth
5. Education
6. Church position
7. Personal success
8. Past failure
9. Victimhood
10. Public approval

All these identities are temporary and incomplete.

The Christian's deepest identity is:

“I belong to Jesus Christ.”

VIII. Christ Creates a New Community

Galatians 3:28

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This verse does not erase every distinction between people.

Paul recognized ethnic, social, and biological realities elsewhere in his writings.

His point is that these distinctions no longer determine a person's spiritual value, access to God, or standing in God's family.

A. Neither Jew nor Gentile

Ethnic and religious divisions separated people in the ancient world.

In Christ, Gentile believers do not become second-class members of God's family.

Jew and Gentile come to God through the same Savior.

Both are justified by faith.

Both receive the Holy Spirit.

Both belong to the people of God.

B. Neither Slave nor Free

Social and economic status divided people.

In Christ, the slave possessed the same spiritual standing as the wealthy free person.

The master and servant stood side by side under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Wealth, position, and influence do not give anyone greater access to God.

C. Neither Male nor Female

Men and women often experienced vastly different social standing in the ancient world.

Paul declares that both receive the full blessings of salvation.

1. Men are not more justified than women.
2. Women are not less adopted than men.
3. Both receive the Holy Spirit.
4. Both are clothed with Christ.
5. Both are heirs of God's promise.

D. Unity Does Not Mean Uniformity

The gospel does not say that everyone is identical.

It says that everyone in Christ is:

1. Equally accepted
2. Equally justified
3. Equally adopted
4. Equally dependent upon grace
5. Equally an heir of the promise

Christian unity is not based on sameness.

It is based on union with Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What distinctions commonly divide people today?
2. What is the difference between unity and uniformity?
3. How does the gospel challenge racism, classism, sexism, and social pride?
4. Why do churches sometimes struggle to live out the unity they proclaim?
5. What does it look like to treat another believer as an equal heir of grace?

Application

Examine whether you instinctively assign greater value to certain kinds of people.

Do you favor people because of:

1. Race
2. Income
3. Education
4. Age
5. Political agreement
6. Social influence
7. Appearance
8. Family background
9. Church experience

The cross places all believers on level ground.

No one enters God's family through superior morality, intelligence, culture, or social standing.

We all enter through Christ.

The church should be the place where people who might never naturally associate with one another become brothers and sisters.

IX. Those Who Belong to Christ Are Abraham's Heirs

Galatians 3:29

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Paul brings his argument back to Abraham.

A. The True Heirs of Abraham Belong to Christ

The true family of Abraham includes everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ.

This includes:

1. Believing Jews
2. Believing Gentiles
3. People from every nation
4. People from every social class
5. Men and women who trust in Christ

B. The Promise Is Fulfilled in Christ

God promised Abraham that through his offspring all nations would be blessed.

That promise is fulfilled in Jesus.

Those who are united with Christ share in the blessings of God’s promise to Abraham.

C. Believers Receive an Inheritance

To be an heir means that we receive an inheritance.

The believer’s inheritance includes:

1. Forgiveness
2. Righteousness
3. Adoption
4. The Holy Spirit
5. Eternal life
6. Resurrection
7. The kingdom of God

8. The new creation
9. Life with God forever

D. The Inheritance Is Received, Not Earned

The inheritance does not come through law-keeping.

It is received through faith in Christ.

We do not work our way into God's will.

Through Christ, we are brought into God's family.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to belong to Christ?
2. How does Paul define the true family of Abraham?
3. What spiritual inheritance belongs to believers?
4. How does our future inheritance give us hope during present suffering?

Application

Live as an heir rather than as an orphan.

An orphan mindset says:

1. "I must provide everything for myself."
2. "I am alone."
3. "My future depends entirely on me."
4. "I have to prove my worth."
5. "There may not be enough for me."

An heir of God can say:

1. "My Father knows what I need."
2. "I belong to His family."
3. "My future is secure in Christ."
4. "My worth rests in grace."
5. "My true inheritance cannot be taken away."

Major Theological Themes

I. The Purpose of the Law

The law:

1. Reveals sin
2. Defines sin
3. Exposes guilt
4. Restrains evil
5. Points sinners toward Christ

The law cannot:

1. Forgive sin
2. Give spiritual life
3. Change the human heart
4. Justify the sinner
5. Replace the work of Christ

II. The Necessity of Faith

Justification is received through faith in Jesus Christ, not through human achievement.

III. Union with Christ

Believers are:

1. In Christ
2. Baptized into Christ
3. Clothed with Christ
4. Identified with Christ
5. Included among Christ's people

IV. Adoption

Through faith, believers become children of God and members of His family.

V. Christian Unity

Ethnic, social, economic, and biological distinctions do not determine spiritual worth or access to God.

VI. Inheritance

All who belong to Christ are heirs of the promise given to Abraham.

Practical Applications

I. Stop Using the Law as a Ladder

You cannot climb your way to God through religious performance.

Obedience matters, but it cannot erase guilt or produce spiritual life.

Trust in Christ rather than your religious résumé.

II. Let the Law Function as a Mirror

When Scripture exposes sin, do not blame the mirror.

Confess what God reveals and turn to Christ for forgiveness and transformation.

III. Refuse Both Pride and Despair

The law destroys pride because everyone is guilty.

The gospel destroys despair because Christ saves guilty people.

IV. Build Your Identity Around Christ

Your greatest identity is not your:

1. Occupation
2. Politics
3. Family history
4. Successes
5. Failures
6. Reputation

Your deepest identity is that you belong to Jesus.

V. Treat Other Believers as Family

Do not merely tolerate Christians who differ from you.

Receive them as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

VI. Live with the Confidence of an Heir

Your present circumstances do not define your final future.

In Christ, you possess an eternal inheritance that cannot perish, spoil, or fade.

Group Discussion Questions

1. Before studying this passage, how would you have answered the question, “Why did God give the law?”
 2. Which image of the law is most helpful to you: a mirror, a guardian, a prison, or a medical diagnosis? Why?
 3. What is one thing the law can do?
 4. What is one thing the law cannot do?
 5. Why are people tempted to trust in their morality or religious activity?
 6. What is the difference between being declared righteous and becoming a child of God?
 7. What identities compete with your identity in Christ?
 8. What social or cultural divisions threaten the unity of the church?
 9. How should Galatians 3:28 affect the way Christians treat one another?
 10. What does being an heir of God mean for your present fears?
 11. Where are you tempted to live like an orphan rather than a child of God?
 12. What is one specific action you can take this week in response to this passage?
-

Personal Reflection

Complete the following statements:

1. The law shows me that _____.
 2. I am tempted to trust in _____ instead of Christ.
 3. Because I am in Christ, I no longer have to define myself by _____.
 4. One person I need to treat more like a brother or sister is _____.
 5. One promise of God I need to remember this week is _____.
-

Conclusion

Galatians 3:19–29 teaches that the law was never God’s method of salvation.

1. The law reveals our need.
2. Christ meets our need.
3. The law exposes our guilt.
4. Christ provides righteousness.
5. The law holds sinners accountable.
6. Christ brings believers into God’s family.

Through faith in Jesus, believers are:

1. Justified
2. Adopted
3. Clothed with Christ
4. United with God’s people
5. Made heirs of God’s promise

The central question is not:

“Have I kept the law well enough?”

The central question is:

“Do I belong to Christ?”

Those who belong to Christ are no longer defined by condemnation, performance, social standing, or past failure.

They are children of God and heirs of His promise.