

THE PROOF OF THE LAW'S POWERLESSNESS GALATIANS 03:19–22

Introduction

There were some teachers in the Galatian churches who were teaching that a person is justified, that is, acceptable to God because...

- he does the very best he can: he honestly tries to obey the law of God and to do as much good as he can.
- he practices religion: he keeps the rituals, ceremonies and rules of the church.
- he has submitted to the basic ritual of the church (circumcision, church membership, baptism or whatever).

All of these are important: everyone should be faithful in obeying the law, in practicing religion and in being baptised. However, Scripture is abundantly clear: these are not the things that *actually justify* a person. Jesus Christ alone justifies a person. Man can do nothing whatsoever — exert no energy, no effort, no work — to make himself acceptable to God. A person is acceptable and justified before God only when he believes, truly believes in God's Son, Jesus Christ. There are many people...

- who exert all kinds of energy and effort in keeping the law and doing the best they can, but they *do not believe in Jesus Christ*.
- who practice religion, but they *do not believe in Jesus Christ*.
- who have been circumcised and baptised, but they *do not believe in Jesus Christ*.

The raw energy — the fundamental act — that saves a person is *faith in Jesus Christ, true faith* in God's very own Son. When a person truly believes in God's Son, God takes that person's belief and counts his belief as righteousness. God accepts that person because he honours God's Son — honours Jesus Christ by entrusting and giving all he is and has into His keeping.

Since this is so, why then did God give the law to man? If we are not saved and justified by obeying the law of God and doing the best we can, what is the purpose of the law? This is the discussion of this passage: to show that the law is powerless in saving a man. And the powerlessness of the law actually proves that a person is justified or made acceptable to God by faith.

- I. The law was given to reveal sin — to make men more aware of their sins (v. 19).
 - II. The law was temporary (v. 19).
 - III. The law was not given by God, but through a mediator; therefore, it is inferior (vv. 19-20).
 - IV. The law has no power to give life (v. 21).
 - V. The law declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin (v. 22).
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I. *Galatians 03:19 The Purpose of Law*

How do we know that the law does not justify or make a person acceptable to God?

Because the law was given to reveal sin — to make people more aware of their sins. Note the crucial fact: the law was not given to make men righteous, but...

- to make men aware of their sin and condemnation.
- to show men that they are short of God's glory.
- to stir men to pay attention to the fact that they are sinners.
- to stop every mouth from boasting and claiming self-righteousness.
- to awaken men to their crying need for God's help.
- to plant in man's mind that he desperately needs God to save him from sin and death.
- to arouse every mouth to confess its need for a Saviour from sin and its punishment (death).

Rom 3:20 *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

Rom 5:20 *The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.*

Rom 7:7 *What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."*

Gal 3:19 *What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.*

Gal 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

1 Tim 1:9 *We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers.*

II. *Galatians 03:19 Law was Temporary*

How do we know that the law does not justify or make a person acceptable to God?

Because the law was temporary. It had a certain course to run and when it was run, it was to be set aside. To say that the law was temporary frightens some believers, for they fear that such a teaching makes way for loose living. Nothing could be further from the truth. Note what Scripture says:

Gal 3:19 *[The law] It was added because of transgressions until the Seed...had come.*

When Jesus Christ came, the law was to be set aside. The law was meant to have only a temporary purpose and life span. It was to extend only from Moses to Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ is “the seed” to whom the promise of righteousness was given. God *never intended the law* to be the way of salvation. It was only for the temporary purpose of showing men their sin and its awfulness.

=> However, note: since Jesus Christ has come, He (His perfect life and righteousness) is to be the standard for men. Jesus Christ fulfilled the law; that is, in Jesus Christ God gave man more than just mere words to describe how He wants man to live. He gave man the Life, the Person who perfectly pictures and demonstrates the law before the world's very eyes. Jesus Christ is the Picture, the Living Example, the Pattern and the Demonstration of life as it is to be lived. He is the Perfect Picture of God's will, the Ideal Man, the Representative Man, the Pattern for all men.

John 1:14 *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Col 1:15 *He is the image of the invisible God, the First-born over all creation.*

Heb 1:3 *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

1 Pet 2:21-23 *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

Now note: since the law was meant to be temporary until Christ came, does that mean that the law has no value for men today? Could we just cut the law out of our Bibles and be just as well off? No, a thousand times no! Jesus Christ fulfilled the law; therefore, He embodies the law. True, He embodies much more than the law, but He does embody the law. The law and its righteousness is part of His nature. Therefore, when a man looks at Jesus Christ, he sees the perfection of His nature, and that perfection includes the righteousness of the law. To cut the law out of our Bibles would be to erase part of our understanding of Jesus Christ and part of His very nature.

Mat 5:17 *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”*

Rom 8:3 *For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man.*

Gal 5:16-18 *So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit*

what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Heb 8:10 *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

Heb 10:15-17 *The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."*

Note another point as well: the law is still in force for the unbelieving world. Why? Because all unbelievers who have not trusted Jesus Christ are trusting their own righteousness to make them acceptable to God. They are still trying to become righteous by the law. Therefore, God shall judge them by the law.

Rom 10:3-4 *Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Gal 3:10 *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

Mathew Henry points out another fact that should be noted: the law can still be used to convince men of sin and to restrain them from living loose and evil lives (*Mathew Henry's Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 661).

III. **Galatians 03:19–20** *Law is Inferior*

How do we know that the law does not justify or make a person acceptable to God? Because the law was not given directly by God, but through a mediator; therefore, it is inferior. Two arguments show this.

1. The law was not given directly by God. The law came from God, but it was given by angels to Moses and then to man. Moses stood as a mediator between God and man in the giving of the law; therefore, the law came to man as a second-hand thing. But not the promise of God. God Himself gave the promise of grace and righteousness (that is, His acceptance and eternal life or the promised land). Abraham received the promise of God directly from God. Therefore, the promise of God is bound to be superior to the law, for it involves more of a personal contact (relationship) with God.
2. The law was between two parties — man and God. In the covenant of law, man and God both had responsibilities or work to do. Man had to keep the law, and if he did, God would act and reward him with the gift of righteousness. The gift of righteousness was conditional under the law.

However, the promise of righteousness or grace was given by God alone. No one could break that promise. If man (Abraham) simply believed God's promise, he received the promise of righteousness and grace.

IV. Galatians 03:21 Law is Powerless

How do we know that the law does not justify or make a person acceptable to God? Because the law has no power to give life.

1. The law is only words and rules. It can only inject the idea of behaviour into the mind of a person. It can only demand — demand that each precept be kept and obeyed. The law is mere words, cold and lifeless. It is entirely external to man, outside the body of man. It has no spirit, no life, no power to enable a person to do the law. It cannot help man to any degree whatsoever as he tries to keep the law. The law demands obedience, but it leaves man entirely on his own as he struggles to obey.
2. The law cannot give life to man. It is not a living being with the power to give life. If it was, then righteousness would have come by law. But, as stated, the law has no life and it has no power. It is mere writing, mere words and rules. However, this is not true of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both a Person and life. Therefore, He is able to put spirit and life to the words and rules of the law. He is able to live the life described by the words and rules. As such, He is able to inject both the idea and the power to behave into a person's mind and life. It is now His life that sets the standard and the rule for the believer; it is His spirit and life that gives the believer power to obey.

Mat 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”

Rom 3:20-22 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference.

Rom 8:3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man.

Heb 7:19 (For the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

V. Galatians 03:22 Law Declares All Men Prisoners of Sin

How do we know that the law does not justify or make a person acceptable to God? Because the law declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin. Note several significant facts.

1. "The Scripture" refers to the law. The law of God, or the Scripture, is conclusive: all men are lawbreakers — all men are prisoners of sin.
2. *Prisoners of sin* (hupo hamartian) means to be shut up as a hostage in the solitary hopeless depths or solitary confinement of a dungeon.

Rom 3:9-20 *What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

Rom 11:32 *For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.*

3. The great purpose of the law is stated again: to drive men to seek the promise of Jesus Christ, that is, righteousness by faith. When men look at the law and see that they are sinners, they are driven to seek a Saviour, even Jesus Christ. Man can seek and trust the righteousness which Jesus Christ has secured. When a man believes in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ judges that man righteous, and the man becomes a "participant in the divine nature of God" (2 Pet. 1:4).

Rom 5:1 *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Gal 3:6 *Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Phil 3:9 *And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ■*