

Basics of the Faith: Law & Gospel
Romans 3:19-4:3
August 2, 2020

We have spent five Sundays reflecting on the meaning of the ten words and its public reading in Ezra/Nehemiah. Today I am moving forward to the New Testament and explore how the law and gospel relate to one another. At first glance there seems to be no relationship! How can the law with its demands square with Jesus' gospel of grace and forgiveness? The law seems quite clear: those who break it are cursed and those who keep it are blessed. The gospel on the other hand, is equally clear: those who believe in Jesus are forgiven and blessed. Under the old covenant when you broke the commandments you had the opportunity to find forgiveness through the sacrificial system. But it remained a system of works in order to be justified before a Holy God.

It so easy for us is it not, to slip into the idea that we have to earn our way into God's good books. If we think that way then it's easy to consider only the so-called good people, the respectable, the rich, the religious, the successful, as the recipients of God's gift. But Jesus has no time for such thinking. In many places we read that Jesus spent time with people considered the lowest in society, or the people that the religious elite called sinners. Jesus says to his critics that it's not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. His mantra is: *I came to call sinners not the virtuous.*

This brings us to the main point Paul seeks to make in Romans. There is still a general sense in our society that keeping the "golden rule" can earn us points in some mysterious accountants' books. Perhaps we think by being good people, good neighbours, good citizens, doing to others as we would have them do to us, will earn us points in the heavenly accounts ledger. The Jews of Paul and Jesus' day placed a huge stock in keeping the Law. They were forever trying to catch Jesus out for breaking this or that commandment. So, Paul introduces the figure of Abraham. He was considered the father of the family of Israel, the father of the faithful.

Now Paul asks us this morning, as Jesus asked his contemporaries, did Abraham's right standing with God come about through his

obedience to the law? No, Paul says, Abraham believed God's promise and so through his faith was blessed. Indeed, Paul goes on in his argument to suggest that Abraham was blessed long before the giving of the Law to Moses. He was considered righteous, or if you like, in right standing with God, not through his good works in conformity to the ten commandments, but through faith. His trust in God's promise is what God responded to with blessing.

Listen to Paul in Galatians: *We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. (Gal 3: 15ff)*

Today, to be blessed by God requires that we receive God's gift of faith in Jesus through faith.

Again, Paul in Galatians makes this crystal clear: *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:11ff)*

If we lack this trust, we reject the lordship of God and remain under the lordship of some other power. Trying to maintain a relationship with God based on our efforts to keep the commandments is doomed to failure, for we are still under sin's power. This is the heart of Paul's teaching in our reading. Abraham is the perfect illustration of this point because he was considered righteous long before the receiving of the law.

Let's put it this way. We come up to two doors, one marked "works", the other "faith". The first door has a whole list of words under "works". It has in small letters "self-righteousness", "pride in one's independence", "church membership", "good works", "baptism", "respectability", "being a good neighbour", "kind", and the list goes on down to the bottom of the door. The door marked "faith", has a much shorter list. It simply says, "trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour",

“receives with joy God’s salvation found in Christ”, “humbly bows before God’s Son as the way, the truth and the life”

Essentially this is the door that Paul advocates that we walk through. And once through that door we live the ethic proclaimed in the first door marked “works”. Christians are people who live out the life of Jesus in the world, not because they are good or better than others, but because the love of God impels them to so act. Faith comes first. Works follow. Not the other way around says Paul.

So, the question remains: why the law? What purpose does it serve when we cannot keep it? How does it relate to the Gospel?

Central to our Reformed heritage is Luther’s clear distinction between law and gospel. In medieval religious thinking that Luther grew up in, it was commonly believed that self-effort and suffering would bring a sinner to heaven. It was a system that included relics, purgatory, penance, fear, and uncertainty, and no matter how hard Luther tried in this system he could never find peace before the majesty, justice, and holiness of God. Over time, however, as Luther studied the Scriptures, he rediscovered the good news of the gospel which freed his tormented conscience. From then on his theological revolution hinged on the distinction between law and gospel. Without this distinction, he argued, the gospel turns into command, rather than an announcement of good news of what God has offered in Christ. Without this distinction he repeatedly argued, one is left with a false religion, in which we try to ascend to God by our good works.

As Reformed Christians, we are part of that revolution Luther started. We too believe in this clear distinction between law and gospel. Heaven is only achievable through faith in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. No amount of effort, or piety, or good works, open that heavenly realm to us.

Paul makes this pretty clear to the Christians in Galatia: *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? (Gal 3:1ff)*

Then what is the purpose of the law when it is so ineffective? Paul argues that it was our schoolmaster that led us to Christ. The law is not the problem! Sin is the problem. Paul argues that the law is holy, but we could never be justified under the law because of our inability to keep it. Paul says in Galatians: *Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (Gal 3:19ff)*

There is one final point that needs to be made when introducing Abraham's example. We can't help noticing that it was through Abraham that God's blessing to the world was to come. In Genesis we read, as Paul quotes here in Romans, "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The people of faith, who like Abraham have left the security of their gods and trusted God's promise of salvation, are people who continue to tell others the good news. We at West Flamboro are people who believe this good news that Luther found one day in the Scriptures. We too are entrusted with this gospel to share with others so that they too might find life and hope and peace.

Amen