

**“GOD TOLD ABRAHAM WHAT HE WOULD DO,
NOT WHAT HE MIGHT DO IF ABRAHAM SHOWED HIMSELF WORTHY.”**

- In Galatians 3:19–22, we meet the most marked contrast between the gospel and everything else: In the New Testament, “moral effort can be a mortal sin.” Universally, natural human reason—especially when applied to religion—puts the law to the wrong use ... [Ibid. p.100]
- Notice: Paul isn’t cursing those outside the church, he’s aiming at those who diminish grace—and cultivate pride—by supposing that it’s possible to gain God’s favor through God-talk, church attendance, profession of right doctrine, meal-time prayers, regular Bible reading, avoiding gross sins, and the like. The Galatians are running with the ball, trying to score points in helter-skelter frenzy of “doing the right thing,” so Paul sounds the penalty buzzer. [Ibid. p.80]
- When he says “works of the law,” he is speaking about legalism—depending upon morals and religion to gain or keep favor with God. In other words, legalism is a misuse of the law. When Moses received the law, he wasn’t being given a ladder to climb to God. So Paul is screaming, “Danger, danger, danger!” Living only by the law isn’t gaining merit; it’s a death sentence. [Ibid. p.82]
- And here’s the crux of the matter: Legalistic striving draws us away from God. From beginning to end, it is self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-effort, and pride. At its heart lies a mindset that relationally separates us from God. It’s saying, “I’m doing well on my own. I don’t need you to carry me, God. I can do this!” [Ibid. p.83]
- Why does God justify you when you live by faith? Because faith confesses inadequacy. It doesn’t trust in itself. Faith throws itself upon the cross, dying to self-reformation, and lives by union with the “Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). ... As John Calvin has written:
- The law justifies him who fulfills all of its precepts, while faith justifies those who are destitute of the merit of works, and rely on Christ alone. To be justified by our own merit, and to be justified by the grace of another, are two schemes which cannot be reconciled: one of them must be overturned by the other.
- Do you now see why Paul says, “The law is not of faith” (Gal 3:12)? Living by the law cannot lead to reliance on Christ, crying out for his mercy, or casting oneself upon his love. [Ibid. p.84]
- Here, Paul encourages us by anchoring us outside of ourselves. You can’t stabilize a storm-tossed boat by tying ropes from itself to itself; it needs an anchor down deep, beyond the choppy surface. Paul’s argument goes as follows: God’s covenant promise to Abraham will be in place forever; it cannot be annulled by the giving of the law (which came later). Therefore, your justification is eternally assured, safeguarded by God Almighty, sworn on the blood of his Son, sealed with the Spirit as the pledge of your inheritance. Your anchor is in heaven, not on earth; it’s in the life of the triune God, not the fickle emotions and feeble will of your vacillating heart.
- When life gets difficult, when it all falls apart, where do you look? Christ is still there; the promise is for keeps. That’s our anchor. [Ibid. p.89-90]
- Today we give our signatures before witnesses. But in the ancient world, it was customary to conduct a ceremony in which animals were sacrificed, cut in two along the backbone, and placed in two parallel rows with a path between. For obvious reasons, this was called “cutting a covenant.” Clearly, it was a bit more dramatic than swiping a card through the e-reader or signing on the dotted line! The parties making the agreement would walk between the

OUR NATURAL MOTTO IS: “BY DOING RIGHT, I CAN BE RIGHT.”

- rows and speak their promises, the shed blood making the oath sacred. As they walked between the slain animals they were in effect saying, “If I break the terms of this agreement, this is what you can do to me!” While it sounds like a scene from The Godfather, it was a common practice in the ancient world. [Ibid. p.90-91]
- ***The covenant, therefore, was unilateral—airtight, irrevocable, and unchangeable. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking that the later covenant with Moses was either “Plan B” or a replacement “will and testament” to be brought out of the cupboard when the first one went belly up. The covenant God made with Moses, which gave the law, didn’t amend, abrogate, or annul the unilateral promise in any way. If it did, if the Israelites were supposed to earn their salvation by keeping the law of the later covenant, God would have been canceling his own promises—making him unfaithful and a liar. [Ibid. p.91-92]
- Put simply, the law wasn’t given to make you better, but to make you worse. Martin Luther explained it thus: The Law cannot do anything except that with its light it illumines the conscience for sin, death, judgment, and the hate and wrath of God. Before Law comes, I am smug and do not worry about sin; when the Law comes it shows me sin, death and hell. Surely this is not being justified; it is being sentenced, being made an enemy of God, being condemned to death and hell. Therefore the principal purpose of the Law in theology is to make men not better but worse; that is, it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring. [Ibid. p.100]
- The law is God’s sledgehammer: It shatters the rock of self-righteousness of your heart; it pulverizes the pride of our moralistic endeavors. [Ibid. p.102-103]
- This function of the law is of limited duration. Paul’s going to have a lot to say about that soon, but he runs a signal up the flagpole here to let us know that this purpose of the law is not endless. Its unfailing word of condemnation isn’t God’s last word; Christ is.
- Once the law has caused us to long for Christ by exposing us as sinners and expanding our sins on all fronts, it has done its proper job. It doesn’t give life, but kills so that we turn to Christ for life each and every day. Through the law, we die to the law as a means of life, so that we may be crucified with Christ. [Ibid. p.103]
- The law doesn’t give life, precisely because it is pointing to life elsewhere. The law “imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”
- In other words, the law makes us ready for the gospel; it prepares us to dance with the Trinity. [Ibid. p.104]
- As Luther said: Only when a person’s sin is disclosed and increased through the law does he begin to see the wickedness of the human heart and its hostility towards both the law and its author, who is God. Only then does that person realize that not only does he not love, but that he hates and blasphemes God, and as a result he is forced to confess that there is nothing good in him at all. When the law forces us to acknowledge and confess our sins in this way it has fulfilled its function and is no longer needed, because the moment of grace has come. [Ibid. p.104]

* All quotes on this page are from *Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians* by Daniel Bush and Noel Due. [Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). *Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]