

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 11

Galatians 3:10-14

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Text Comment

v.10 Literally, "all who are of the works of the law". There is an unspoken but assumed minor premise in Paul's argument, viz. that no one, in fact, keeps the law. The law pronounces a curse on those who do not do everything it requires; no one, in fact does everything it requires; therefore, everyone is under the curse of the law. Elsewhere he says this straight out, but it is a point that hardly needs to be demonstrated. As Chesterton once wrote, the doctrine of original sin is the only doctrine of Christianity with undeniable empirical verification!

v.12 Paul is setting over against one another the principles of the two ways of conceiving of salvation: faith and works. And he is using biblical texts to elucidate those principles. The citation of Habakkuk 2:4 simply confirms that the Bible itself establishes the fact that the just (or righteous, for it is the same word) live by faith. But the citation of Leviticus 18:5 is more problematic, because Paul seems to be taking that text out of context. After all, Leviticus 18:5 has nothing to do with justification by works of the law; it is not a statement **condemning** the idea of justification by works, it is the promise of reward to those who obey and assumes an already existing faith and relationship to God based on his gracious works of salvation. The passage reads:

"You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord."
[Leviticus 18:4-5]

This is a verse, and there are many such verses in the Bible, in the NT as well as the OT, that promises blessing and prosperity to those who obey the law of God. "In the keeping of the commandments of God there is a great reward." [Psalm 19:11]

But here Paul seems to be taking this text as a statement of the works principle. But the solution is really quite simple, it seems to me. Paul is simply saying that, **if one embraces the works principle, if one is going to argue that it is by our obedience, our deeds that our justification before God comes to any degree, then one must be true to the principle one has chosen and face the fact that everything then depends upon his or her doing what the law requires.** If you take Leviticus 18:5 legalistically, then you must, to be consistent, commit yourself to the keeping of every single one of God's laws. If you say you live because you keep the commandments of God, then face the facts, if you don't keep them, you must die.

Herman Ridderbos, the great Dutch biblical theologian of the last generation, summarizes the point Paul is making this way:

"What Paul means to say is this, that he who strives after the righteousness that is by the law is then bound to the word of Moses, that is, to do what the law demands. Likewise the wrong use of the law, to be zealous for the law without understanding, finds in the law itself the standard to which, if it is to have a chance of success, it must measure up. This is not an appeal to Moses in support of 'a false position,' but a binding of this position to its own point of departure...' [Paul: An Outline..., 156]

It is an argument like that the Lord himself used against the Pharisees in John 5:45: "But do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set."

Paul's argument is what logicians call an *argumentum e contrario*, "by which he seeks to prove that instead of men being blessed by coming under the law they must, **according to their own premises**, come under a curse." If you are going to understand the Bible's requirements to obey the law of God as expressing the way of a sinner's justification before God, then you are stuck with the fact that the Bible says you have to do everything, always and in every way, that God's law requires. If you fail at any time, in any part, you are under the curse of the law.

Paul is, of course, not denying that all men are under this curse. He has just affirmed as much in his citation of Deuteronomy 27:26. He is simply pointing out that the legalist is under the same curse and has no way to avoid it or escape it because he was looking to the law and his own obedience to the law as the way of his justification. But, because he is a sinner and a law breaker, the law condemns him, it does not justify him.

v.13 But the man of faith knows a way out of the dilemma created by his sin and the law's curse.

v.14 "Redemption" is one of the three great metaphors employed in the Bible to describe the work of Christ as our Savior from sin. Redemption is the buying someone out of bondage by the paying of a price, the price being called a ransom. You pay a ransom and redeem the one who is held in bondage. [The usage is found in common parlance. I got my first .22 rifle with S&H Green Stamps my mother supplied and I collected my new gun from what was called "The Redemption Center." I handed over the price, the ransom, and delivered my .22 from bondage! Still today we speak of "redeeming" coupons at the store, which reminds us of the idea of buying back or getting back that lies at the root of this idea.] You will remember how the Mosaic law provided for redemption at a number of points, especially of those who had become slaves. There was actually a role of Redeemer in the Israelite law, a kinsman redeemer (goel) who had the right and the privilege of buying his relatives out of bondage (Boaz was such in Ruth and Naomi's case). So when Job says, "I know that my Redeemer lives..." (19:25) he is confessing himself to be in a bondage from which only another can bring him out.

The other two great metaphors used to explain Christ's death are propitiation (a turning

away from wrath-- which Christ does by removing the cause of the wrath, our sin and guilt) and reconciliation (a bringing together of parties that are estranged, which Christ does by taking away our sin, which Isaiah said, has made a separation between ourselves and God (59:2).

"cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" in its original context does not refer to crucifixion per se (Deuteronomy 21:23). It referred rather to the practice of hanging the dead body of a criminal up **after** he had been executed. Crucifixion was not an OT or Jewish practice. But if being hung up **after** death was a sign of shame and curse, **how much more** being killed on the tree itself and exposed through the entire process of death. Hebrew executions were much more merciful than that!

- v.14** The "blessing of Abraham" is, of course, the justification before God that Paul has been talking about; that Abraham received by faith. We, and Paul is including the Gentile converts in Galatia, who were under a curse and would have received the just punishment of our sins, are now at peace with God and righteous before him, and have the promised Holy Spirit within them, the pledge of everlasting life and the power by which they can live new lives unto God. NB re law and gospel as Paul is discussing them, Jews and Gentiles are in the same situation.

In other words, Paul argues, the judaizers' position is disproved in two separate ways. First, if you interrogate the Scriptures as to the means of man's justification before God, the answer given is explicitly that it is by faith, not only in Genesis 15:6 but in Habakkuk 2:4. But, second, if you read the Scripture the way the judaizers do, and are consistent, the statements of the Bible disprove their position anyway -- for nothing less than perfect obedience will suffice according to the law and no one offers perfect obedience to God.

[Actually, the rabbis of Judaism at this time discussed at length just how much righteousness was needed: almost 100%; 51% or something less. But God's mercy was counted on to tip the scales. Actually, they operated with a three-fold division very similar to that of Roman Catholic theology. The very righteous went straight to heaven -- the Enochs of this world. The very wicked went straight to hell. The theological problem was created by the vast majority who are found in the middle -- neither fully wicked nor fully righteous. Their situation was what the rabbis debated, with a kind of purgatory sometimes part of the solution.

A famous dialogue goes like this:

"Rabbi Eliezer said, 'The scales are in perfect balance. On one side are the sins, on the other, the merits. God makes the side with the merits go down. This is indicated in the phrase 'full of mercy' (Numbers 14:18), because he inclines toward mercy.

"Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah [said]: 'The scales are in perfect balance.... Then God lightens the side of the sins, and the merits carry the day. This is indicated by the phrase, 'He takes away sins.'"

You have here a conception you never find in the OT, the assumption, that we know was widespread in the Judaism of that time, as it is in our culture today, that a man can accumulate merits before God. It matters not if God is needed at the last to complete the salvation. A man's righteousness, not God's grace is what distinguishes those who are saved from those who are lost, and divine grace is now just leniency that overlooks faults, not the monumental and perfectly complete dealing with sin and guilt that the Bible promises.

However salvation was conceived, and there were many differences of detail, it was human merit of some kind that got one into the circle where the grace of God would make the rest of the difference. As I have told you before, the Bible **never** divides the human race into three -- it is always into two, the righteous and the wicked. And it does this precisely because a person's status is not a measure of exactly how righteously he lives, but whether he is a member of the family of God by faith in Christ.]

But, Paul says, we know better. We must escape the curse for we are all under it as sinners. We are all subject to divine wrath because we have fallen short of the glory of God. But there is a way to escape that curse that does not lean on the broken reed of our works of the law, our obedience, our imagined goodness. Rather, by faith in Christ, we partake of his having borne the curse for us in our place.

This is the Bible's doctrine of substitution, an idea that is profoundly biblical, though that word, "substitution," is not anywhere used. But it is perfectly clear that in this case one person is put in the place, in the stead of another, which is what substitution means. When Jesus said that he came to give his life a ransom for (*anti*) many, the preposition translated for is the Greek preposition that means "in the place of" or "in exchange for." The preposition translated "for" in v. 13 "a curse **for** us" is *hyper*, which can mean the same thing and seems to here. We were subject to the curse, Christ came and bore it for us in our place, and now we are free of that curse.

Can Paul be taken to mean anything else? And is this not what the Bible has said a hundred times before. "...the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all." "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him." "He bore our sins on the tree." "Our sins were laid upon him." "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." And so on. And this is, of course, the substitution so powerfully depicted in the sacrificial ritual, in which the laying on of hands **preceded** the death of the animal. It died in the place of the worshipper!

This is, of course, what Christian hymns have also taught us to say and to rejoice in deep in our hearts:

What thou, my Lord, has suffered was all for sinners' gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.

Lo, the Good Shepherd, for the sheep is offered;
the slave has sinned, and the Son has suffered...

In my place condemned he stood,
Sealed my pardon with his blood...

And a thousand more texts like that.

So it may surprise you to learn that in many quarters, including many evangelical quarters, the whole notion of substitution is viewed with distaste. This is chiefly because of the assumptions and the prerequisites of the doctrine of substitution.

Before we can see Christ as our substitute, bearing the curse in our place, we must accept that God's wrath threatens sinful human beings with judgment, we must accept that God will not forgive unless his justice is satisfied and the curse the law pronounces against sin is enforced, and we must believe that Christ in dying, bore the curse and carried it away, that is, that the sins for which he died have now been punished and removed. All of these ideas are problematic for many -- the idea of a wrathful God, a God of retribution is very uncongenial to the modern mind; the idea that God cannot save without having punished sin seems strange and unnecessary, and the idea that Christ has, in fact, borne sin and the curse away -- leaving, in the opinion of many, only two alternatives -- that all are saved because Christ died for all; or that Christ only died for some, those who are eventually saved by his death -- either does not leave us with the gospel most wish to believe or seems to undermine human responsibility.

And so, believe me, brothers and sisters, if you think the Bible speaks clearly about this, and I think it does, you will be disappointed to discover what fog there is to be found in even evangelical discussions of Christ's atonement. So many today are like F.W. Robertson, the British pastor and contemporary of Ryle and Spurgeon, of whom Rabbi Duncan said that Robertson believed that "Christ did something or other which, somehow or other, had some connection or other with salvation."

But this is not the doctrine of the Bible. It says in words that have been plain enough for Christians to understand through the ages that "Jesus Christ, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory." [Packer, *What did the Cross Achieve?*, 25]

It says that God's justice and holiness requires the punishment of sin; it says that because we are all sinners, we are liable to that condemnation and punishment and, as sinners, are helpless either to undo the past or avert what threatens us; it says that Christ came into the world precisely to bear in our place that punishment which is our due, so that we would not have to bear it ourselves; and, for that reason, it says that the way of salvation and, particularly, of justification, or attaining a righteous standing before a holy God, is to look away from ourselves to Christ and to what he has done for us in our place, to seek from God's merciful hand the application of Christ's curse-bearing to our situation before him.

Our conscience, once awakened can be pacified by one thing only: the knowledge that horrible as our sins are and great as the guilt they incur is, they have already been judged and already punished, and so they do not threaten us anymore.

So the verses of Toplady's famous hymn:

From whence this fear and unbelief?
Hath not the Father put to grief
His spotless Son for me?
And will the righteous Judge of men
Condemn me for that debt of sin,
Which, Lord, was laid on Thee?

If thou my pardon hast secured,
And freely in my room endured
The whole of wrath divine,
Payment God cannot twice demand,
First from my bleeding surety's hand
And then again from mine.

It is this substitution, this "Christ for us," this curse-bearing in our place, that makes Christ's salvation so sure, so perfectly suitable to our need, and gives us that absolute assurance of our peace with God that the Bible everywhere teaches is the inheritance of those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Here is John Calvin:

"Our acquittal is in this -- that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God (Is. liii. 12). We must specially remember this substitution in order that we may not be all our lives in trepidation and anxiety, as if the just vengeance, which the Son of God transferred to himself, were still impending over us." [*Institutes*, II, xvi, 5]

Some of you struggle chronically and all of us struggle from time to time to believe that our sins have really been taken away, that we can really have been forgiven all that we have done and failed to do. But here is the surest answer to that doubt! It may seem even a bit harsh -- the bucket of cold water in the face; the "thanks, I needed that" slap in the face -- but it is what a Christian conscience needs to hear. To doubt your forgiveness, if you believe in Jesus Christ, is to doubt that Jesus took your place, or suffered your punishment, or, even worse, to doubt that the punishment he suffered was great enough, was terrible enough to satisfy for sins such as yours. Put it that way and you see how nearly blasphemous that doubt really is. How impossible it must be to justify any doubt that God still sees you as guilty for the sins for which Christ, his beloved Son, suffered and died in your place.

Satan is called the "accuser of the brethren." And he must be a subtle and crafty and powerful

enemy indeed, if he can get Christians to doubt their forgiveness, knowing what they know about how that forgiveness was obtained: Jesus Christ coming in their place and bearing their curse for them. Let us not, not a single one of us, give him the satisfaction of taking from us this solid confidence and this abiding joy and gladness

"that when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."