

The law is a servant, not a master

Galatians 3:23-29

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Pentecost

This Galatians text is a great text because of what it says about the law as our “custodian.” “. . . Before faith came, we were confined under the law . . . the law was our custodian until Christ came . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian”

The word “custodian” today is commonly understood as another word for “janitor.” But, of course, that’s not the kind of custodian that Paul is talking about.

In the original context the word “custodian” here refers to a slave who had the job of raising a male child to manhood. The slave, the custodian, had real authority over the young man. He was more than a guardian, more than a coach, more than a private tutor. For all practical purposes, he was the master of that child.

But when the young man reached maturity, perhaps 18, the roles were then reversed. The young man became the master and assumed control over the slave.

The same is true for us regarding the law. Before Christ, the law was our master, our custodian. After Christ, the roles are reversed. The law is no longer our master; it returns to its proper role as a servant, and we become stewards of the law, the ones in charge of caring for the law and using the law wisely for its proper purpose.

When we think of law, we think of the Ten Commandments. For the ancient Jewish people, the law was about holiness and justice. It was about doing the will of the Lord. “The Law” became the 613 laws of the Torah. It could not be divided into some moral and other ceremonial laws. It could not be divided into laws of greater and lesser importance. It could not be divided into some laws for all people and some laws just for the ancient Jews. Rather, the law was about salvation. Every jot and tittle.

The Apostle Paul was highly trained in Rabbinic law. When scholars study his letters, they find that he uses word “law” in six or seven ways. Sometimes he means the Ten Commandments. Sometimes he means the whole law as summed up in the 613 laws of the Torah. (That’s what is meant in the Sermon on the Mount.) Sometimes by “the Law” mean the Five Books of Moses. “Law” can mean a principle. Sometimes “the Law” refers to the two great commandments, and since we’re in the year of Luke, it’s important to remember how it goes in Luke: “You shall love the Lord your God with **all** of your heart, and with **all** of your soul, with **all** your strength, and with **all** your mind; and [incidentally] your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27-28).

And there's the problem. We don't love the Lord with **all** our heart, soul, strength, and mind. We can't and we don't. Our nature, like a reflex, is to trust in works.

Paul delivers the verdict: "The Scripture confined all things to sin" (Gal 3:22). Before the throne of God, we don't have an untainted good work to stand on. We can't make it right.

But God did. Through the cross and resurrection, he has made it right again, and therefore, as Paul writes: The law is over. "The law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian" (Galatians 3:24-25).

This is said also in Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified." That time of the law as our custodian is over.

If there is any doubt, we can go to Romans 7:1-6 where Paul uses the illustration that the law is like that bond between husband and wife. As long as both of them are alive, they are bound by the bond. But when one of the spouses dies, the law is over. The other person is free from that bond and can do something else. There is no question that what Paul means is that in Christ the law is terminated, it's over.

Now that Christ has come, our status vis à vis the law is reversed. Now righteousness comes not by the law, but by being covered/clothed in the perfect holiness of Christ, by dying and rising with him in Baptism.

In this way we are made heirs with him. Paul: ". . . [W]e are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" (Galatians 3:25-26).

Faith tells us that the purpose of the law is to take care of this world not prepare for the next. This means we do not have absolute, unchangeable laws. If the law no longer takes care of this world, it can and must be changed.

This is why Luther did not speak of law as something static and unchangeable, even the Ten Commandments.

For example, consider the Third Commandment. It says "Honor the Sabbath, to keep it holy." The Sabbath, of course, is Saturday. The early Christians started worshipping on Saturdays but over time it became a problem. Gradually, for many reasons, over the course of three hundred years, the church changed to worshipping primarily on Sunday.

The Third Commandment says one thing; the church decided to do it differently.

At the time of the Reformation this issue became controversial, and the Reformers wrote:

“Inasmuch as it is contrary to the Gospel to establish such regulations as necessary to appease God and earn grace, it is to at all proper for the bishops to compel observation of such services to God. For in Christendom the teaching of **Christian freedom** must be preserved, namely, that bondage to the law is not necessary for justification, as Paul writes in Galatians 5: ‘For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery’” (Augsburg Confession 28:50-53)

How do we live if there is no eternal law which tells us what to do? No custodian. The roles have been reversed.

Paul helps here. In Romans 13:10 Paul sums up the law in this way: “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Christians have an ethic of love, but this is not sloppy-agape, permissiveness.

Take, for example, smoking. It used to be that many people smoked, often and everywhere, airplanes, schools, hospitals. It was widely tolerated. But that’s no longer true because of the evidence of the harm, the cancer, it causes. Laws changed. Behaviors changed.

Today it is not judgmental to identify smoking tobacco as harmful. It is not judgmental but loving to encourage people to stop smoking.

As Christians, we ask: What does harm? What does the evidence show? What boundaries are best able to protect life and limb and the weak? As grown-up stewards of the law, we are free to use our heads in the battles of life, that is, common reason and common sense.

Our certainty is not in what we’re doing, but in Christ and his forgiveness.

Amen