

Text: Galatians 3:10-14 – The Curse of the Law

Exegetical Big Idea: Humans are all under the curse of the law. The good news of Jesus is that he became the curse for us, and we are freed from it by faith in him.

Homiletical Big Idea: **Faith leads to life, works lead to death.**

Fallen Condition Focus: We are obligated to fulfil God's law, but it is an immeasurable weight that we cannot bear! It will crush us if we do not trust Christ to take it for us.

Background:

We really begin to see the main theme of the book in these verses today. Paul has made his case (and he continues to do so) that we are made right with God not by our performance in regards to God's law, but by our faith in Christ. Paul is now going to flesh out more of what it means to be under the law of God. The person who is under the law of God, and has to meet all its requirements in order to be made right with God is a slave to the law. However, the person who turns to Christ by faith and is made right with God by trusting in his grace alone, is free! Such a person gains right standing with God in Christ, and the Holy Spirit who indwells them, not to mention eternal life in the presence of God.

This is why the gospel is called a gospel of freedom.

Intro:

It was pointed out to me a while ago the difference between a million and a billion. It's only one letter difference, and it's so hard for us to grasp the sheer scale of those numbers. So let me show it to you in a way we can possibly start to understand.

1 million seconds works out to be about 11 days, so just short of about 2 weeks. But let's bump that up a bit. Do you know how many seconds a billions seconds is? A month? A year? It's actually 31.7 years. That's a huge jump! From just under 2 weeks, to just under 32 years. Let's go one more. How many years is a trillion seconds? 100 years? 1000 years? It's 31,688 years. I don't think my mind can handle going any more than that.

Think of that in terms of money. Some people, if they work hard and save money, might be able to acquire a million dollars in their life time. But it'll take more than a normal job to save a billion dollars! And even billionaires, as it is, are only a fraction of the way to a trillion dollars.

It's hard for us to understand the sheer scale of these numbers!

Paul wants us to understand the sheer scale of God's law. For anyone who thinks that they can be saved through obeying God's law, and maintain their relationship with God through obeying his law, they don't get the sheer scale of the weight of God's law. It's a crushing weight that no matter how hard we may try, there is absolutely no way to lift it. If you try, you'll be crushed.

Paul goes even further with his argument in these verses to show us the real weight of God's law, and its consequences. If you really want to go down that path of trying to be right with God by obeying his law, you have to know that it's a path that only leads to one place, death.

Faith leads to life, works lead to death.

Vv. 10-12 – God’s law is a curse for those who are under it.

When we read the very first word of the sentence, and see that it is “For”, we should immediately realize that we are actually continuing a previous thought. Remember that Paul had just finished saying that those who have faith in God are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

So Paul now takes the opportunity to look at the other side of the coin. If it is the case that those who trust God in faith are indeed sons and daughters of Abraham, blessed along with him in Christ, then it is equally true that those who do not come to God in faith, like Abraham did, are *not* blessed. In fact, Paul goes so far as to say that they are cursed!

He wants the Galatians to know that faith and legalistic works, are not just two options, though one is better than the other. It’s not only the case that those who are in Christ by faith are blessed, and those who are not in Christ are not blessed. The reality is that those who instead of coming to God in faith, come to him based on their performance, are cursed.

To give evidence for this bold statement, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 27. It’s an interesting chapter. Moses is writing about when the Israelite finally are ready to enter into the Promised Land. He tells them that half of the tribe of Israel are to stand on one mountain, and the other half on another mountain. Half the tribes are to pronounce curses on Israel if they are disobedient, and the other half are to pronounce blessings on Israel if they are obedient.

[The picture that comes to mind here is one that you may have seen in a movie, where there is a traveler walking down a path and before him there is a fork in the road. To his left is bright and sunny meadow with butterflies and bunnies and soft green grass. To his right however is a dark and scary forest with vines and thistles and wolves.]

These are two opposite paths! It’s not that faith leads to lots of blessing, but relying on works leads to less blessing but still not so bad. Relying on performance to God’s law is a curse!

Paul makes the realization here that the blessings and curses are contingent on one thing, total obedience to the law of God. This is a massive weight! Is Paul seriously saying that we are cursed by God if we are not absolutely one hundred percent obedient to the law of God!? That’s exactly what he is saying! James writes in his letter that if anyone keeps the whole law of God, and yet stumbles on just one part, is guilty of breaking *all* of it.

[Someone has likened it to a very skilled surgeon. He has trained his whole life to become the best surgeon in the world. His track record is absolutely perfect. In all his years he has never lost a patient. But one night, there’s a hockey game on that he doesn’t want to miss. Problem is, he’s in the middle of a 12 hour surgery and he won’t get out before the game starts. So he intentionally botches the surgery. He doesn’t even try to hide it. He does it on purpose and everyone sees it. Well, hey he wants to get to his hockey game. Well of course news of this reaches the authorities and they call him into a meeting and ask him what on earth happened! He tells them the truth and they are furious with him. But then the surgeon reminds them of his track record. He’s saved literally thousands and thousands of patients! Why is he getting punished for just this 1? You see, it doesn’t matter what his track record is, he’s going to jail to this 1 incident! His track record of doing good does not erase his evil action.]

It's exactly the same with us. Look again at verse 10: "...cursed be everyone who does not *abide* by all things written in the Book of the Law, *and do them*". That word abide means to live! Another translation of that word would be to "persevere" in all the things written in God's law. Can you do that? Literally, we are to do, and persevere in doing, not just the important things in God's law, not just most of the things in God's law, but all the things in God's law.

That's the bar. That's God's standard. And by the way, this includes *not* doing things that we should be doing. God's law is not just a matter of staying away from evil, but running towards good. Have you ever not done something that you knew was right? Me too, we're guilty together. But that's the standard. We must fully obey God's law in thought, word, and deed. Guaranteed you've broken that even sitting here this morning. I'm sure I've broken that in the time I walked up to the pulpit.

And just in case we think that this does not include us, but maybe just the Israelites...verse 10 says "for *all* who rely on the works of the law". That's you and me by default. Paul writes to the Romans that *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He also writes that there is no one who seeks God, not even one. We have all gone astray. That means that we are all under the curse of the law.

That's what we call "total depravity". It means that every part of us is broken and stained by sin. Thank God we are not completely corrupt! If that were the case we would not be capable of any good deed at all. But it does mean that there is not a single part of us that is not stained by sin.

It started in the garden. Adam and Eve lived by faith in God, dependant on him and his goodness, enjoy his presence. Until they decided that they would put themselves under the curse of the law. They chose it! They chose to take the fruit. They left the life of trust and faith and entered into the life of being under the curse of having to obey God's law fully.

It's interesting in the passage in Deuteronomy that Paul cites, when the curses are read out, Moses records that "all the people said 'amen'". In a sense we join with those Israelites, and with Adam and Eve and say "amen!" to putting ourselves under the curse when we sin.

Maybe you don't have a legalistic attitude. Maybe you're just trying to do your best to obey God and hope for the best. Unfortunately it doesn't change the fact that you are under a curse. Have you sinned even once in your life? Then you're under the curse. Adam and Eve were removed from God's presence because of 1 single sin. You think you're doing better? In fact the Garden of Eden shows us the result of the curse. They had to leave the presence of God. That's the full weight of the curse that we are under. Eventually, because we do not keep God's law fully, we will be removed from the presence of God in hell.

Faith leads to life, works lead to death.

Vv. 11-12 – You either live by faith or live by the law, but you can't do both.

Paul then appeals to Scripture to show that there is a huge contrast between living by faith, and living by obedience to the law. He quotes from Habakkuk. It's a short quote, but it's full of importance. Paul writes in verse 11 that "the righteous shall live by faith". It's important to know the context of the verse in Habakkuk. In Habakkuk, that verse contrast those who live in faith and trust to God, with those who are puffed and proud, and whose desires are not upright". There is a stark contrast between those who walk in trust of the Lord, and those who walk in self- confidence.

So knowing the context of that quote from Habakkuk helps us understand why Paul uses it here. He's contrasting what it means to come to Christ through faith in his saving work, and trying to be justified before God by our performance in regards to his law.

And this is what the other quotation in verse 12 is saying. Paul says "The one who does them shall live by them". This quote comes from Deuteronomy, and God is in the middle of giving his law to this people. This is admittedly a hard quotation to understand. But I think at the heart of it is this: God promised his people that if they obey his commands, he would keep them in the Promised Land and give them, as a whole nation, peace and prosperity.

But how did that go for them? They couldn't do it! So Paul uses this as an example. Again, in verse 12 he writes "but the law is *not* of faith..." Well if living by the law is not by faith, what is it all about? It's about *doing*. And if it's about doing...it's also about *continuously* doing.

The Israelites were able to keep it up for a while. Yes they stumbled really badly during the time of the judges. In God's mercy he relented his wrath. Then came Saul, and he failed. But then came David and he did ok! He was a pretty good king, but even he couldn't obey fully. And then came Solomon, and after him it all went downhill until eventually they all went into exile.

They couldn't keep it up, or "live by the law", and neither can you or I.

[For the past few months my wife and I had been training to run a 10km race. I'm happy to say that we both completed the race. I can admit that I didn't get a great time, but my goal was to complete the race without having to stop and run. Now probably to some of you that seems rather impressive. And sure, it's not something everyone can do. But to others, a 10km run is just a warmup. There are runners here in the church who run half marathons, and full marathons! However, I don't care how fast you can run, or for how long, everyone has a limit. There has to be a finish line. And the reason there has to be a finish line is because obviously nobody can just run forever without stopping. If we think of obeying God's law as a marathon, where's the finish line?]

If you're going to take the path of "the one who does them shall live by them", then when is enough enough? 5 years? 10 years? 50 years? How about death? Well let's say you do the impossible and never sin your whole life, no where's the finish line? You still have to keep running in heaven! 5 years in heaven? A thousand years in heaven of perfect obedience? Here's the reality if you're really going to justification by obedience seriously, there must be no end to your obedience, because the second you slip up and sin you are under the curse of God's law.

Which leads to the I think the related, but double meaning of this verse. We can read it as living life by faith or living life by works, but we can also understand it in the ultimate meaning of "life".

Which is it that ultimately brings eternal life? Living by obedience to God's law? It can't be since you'll be obeying for all of eternity. Only faith in Christ leads to eternal life.

You know why at the root of it nobody can both live by faith while at the same time live by trying to be justified by works? Because at the root of it is the heart. You cannot at the same time trust God, and trust in your own performance.

My mind goes to the rich young ruler. You remember him. He goes to Jesus and ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to obey the commandments. Jesus then names off a bunch of Mosaic

Law, and the man says he's done all those. But then Jesus turns the script around. Jesus tells him to go and sell everything he has to give to the poor and then follow him. You can search all you want in the Old Testament, but you won't find those commands in there! Why does Jesus tell him to do that? Because Jesus wants his heart. The heart of the young man is in his riches, and his performance. His heart does not belong to God. Jesus is telling him eternal life comes from love for God!

Think about it. What is the greatest commandment? Is it to *obey* the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? Nope. It's to *love* the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Obedience doesn't require love for God. Why do you think God says to the people of Israel in the Old Testament "I hate your sacrifices"? He commanded them to make sacrifices, the people are doing what they're told. Why is God mad? Because they make them without faith and without love. With one hand they kill and cheat and steal, with the other they make a sacrifice.

Legalism does not produce a love for God. It can only serve to produce a love for yourself. On the good days when you think you are doing a good job obeying, you are proud of yourself. On the bad days when you sin, you get angry that God makes it so hard.

No, our performance to be right with God does not produce a love for God. Only faith can do that. Faith surrenders our pride and admits we can't please him on our own. Faith opens our eyes to see the beauty of Christ and his work for us. Faith grows love for God in us.

Why does God want us to love him? Not for his benefit, as if he's needy, but for ours. Love for God is the best thing for us. What better blessing is there than to know God, and be known by God? I've said it many times, and I will continue to say it. Heaven is heaven because God is there. The object of our greatest desire and delight, and the never ending fountain of desire and delight. That's life. The righteous shall live by faith.

Faith leads to life, works lead to death.

Vv. 13-14 - We are saved by Christ being cursed in our place.

So, Paul has firmly established that we cannot lift ourselves out from under the crushing weight of the Law of God. What hope do we even have? Here's where Jesus comes in. Paul gives us the good news in verse 13. He writes "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written 'cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'".

How exactly does Jesus save us from the curse of the law? Does he make a deal with God that we're not as bad he might think we are? Does Jesus talk God out of it like God is some kind of angry old man who just wants people to get off his lawn? Does Jesus negotiate with God somehow?

Not at all, Paul uses the word "redeemed" here. The word redeemed is a loaded word! But I think the easiest way to understand it is to think of it as a purchase in order to save. Jesus saves us by purchasing us. What did he free us from? The curse of the law.

Paul using an interesting quote from Deuteronomy to show us exactly what Christ did for us when he died on the cross. Paul quotes that "cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree". Don't worry, if you've ever had fun climbing a tree this does not mean you are cursed! In Deuteronomy when God is giving his

law, he is outlining the punishment for a murderer or other horrible criminal. Now this is gruesome, but the punishment is death, and then the body is hung on a tree. Why? Simply put, the person is put on display to show to all the people the consequence of sin. This is what sin deserves. In fact the person is considered to be so full of sin that God then commands that the Israelites are not to keep the body up there overnight, because it would defile the land. The idea here is that sin is like a disease that spreads, so get the body down and bury it. The curse of hanging on a tree is the punishment for sin.

Just as the murder is on public display to show what sin does, so Jesus hung on public display to show the results and punishment for sin. Jesus hung on the cross, receiving the full weight of the wrath of God upon sin. Taking on the full weight of the curse of the law.

But here's the confusing part, he never sinned! Jesus is the only one who is *not* under the curse of the law, because he never sinned! So how is it that the One who never sinned and is therefore not under the curse of the law, hangs on a tree as one who is cursed? Jesus dies the death of a murderer, a thief, adulterer, idolater and any and all sins that God's people have committed.

Think of how offensive this message would be to the Jewish people. God's blessed Messiah, prophesied by God's prophets and foretold in the Scriptures, and God's faithful servant to bring salvation to his people, is cursed by God? That is contradictory! It's a solid argument from the Jewish people. How can your saviour be cursed by God?

The answer, because he's my substitution. He hangs there not because of his own sin, but mine!

[I've had the privilege of coaching my son's soccer this year. I've coached my daughter's soccer teams in previous years, as well as assistant coached their baseball teams this year. At those ages they are just starting to learn the rules and the game. They are just starting to learn how to catch and throw and which base is first base and so on and so forth. Now there's usually a skill difference between the players who've never played before, and those who have played for a few years. In fact there's usually what I call a "ringer". The ringer is the kid who obviously has older siblings that play with them, or the kid who practices all the time, but either way it's the kid who is really good for their age. Now if the ringer is on your team, great! But sometimes the ringer is on the opposite team, in which case you're in trouble. But suppose we could make a little substitution. Suppose we could sub in coach Jason. Who would be the ringer then?]

In an infinitely greater sense, Jesus is our ringer. He take upon himself the full weight of God's law. Jesus abides in it, and does all that is required by it. And he will continue to into eternity! Not only does he obey the law on my behalf, but he takes the punishment for my failure to uphold the law. He takes the full weight of the punishment for my sin. At the cross, as Jesus hangs cursed, he takes my sin and transfers to me his obedience and righteousness. That's how Paul can write to the Corinthian church "He became sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God".

This is the glory of the mystery of the incarnation. In a very real sense, Jesus hangs on the cross as Jesus the murderer, Jesus the adulterer, Jesus the idolater. Not that he *did* those things, but that he *became* those things.

And why did he do this? Paul finishes this segment off by says "so that, in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Holy Spirit."

Here we see again the glory of the doctrine of union with Christ. *In* Christ all people, Gentiles included, are heirs to the promises of God, and recipients of God's Holy Spirit.

And all this, "by faith". Why by faith, because the obligation of the Law has been met. The punishment of the Law, which is the curse of the law, has been taken by Jesus. There is nothing left but for us to come to God in faith to be made right with him and receive his blessing.

You know why it's vital for you and me to really understand the scale of God's law? Because if we can truly grasp (even in part because we are human after all) the weight of the curse of the law, we can start to see the strength and love of Jesus. Why put your hope in your own feeble strength, when you can find life in Jesus'?

Faith leads to life, works lead to death.