

Intro: What do you think of the Law? No, I'm not talking about whether we should obey speed limits and pay income tax. I have in mind the Law of God, God's righteous requirements. God gave Israel the Law, the Torah. The Law is the reflection of His holy character, and the revelation of His expectations.

Our study this morning is entitled, "What Do You Think of the Law?" I need to inform you of something at the outset. In homiletics class in seminary, I was taught that in crafting a sermon, I must devote 10% of the message to the introduction, 10% to the conclusion, and 80% to the development of the body of the sermon. As a general rule, that is a helpful guide. But not in this message. I am warning you in advance that the introduction will be lengthy. The reason is because I want you to see the extreme relevance of the issue that Paul addresses in Romans 3:19-20. The issue is the Law.

Romans is about righteousness. In Romans, we learn how people can be made right with a holy God. The issue in Romans 1-3 is "Who" needs God's righteousness? The answer is that we ALL do. As stated in 3:9 "We have before proved both Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin."

A good Jew might object, "Well, what about the Law? God gave our people the Law 14 centuries ago. Are you saying that the Law is bad? What is the purpose of the Law anyway?" Those are the underlying questions Paul addresses as he concludes the first major section of Romans in 3:19-20.

Let me ask you. What should be our attitude towards the Law?

Introduction: Two common attitudes towards the Law...

1. Libertinism--We are free from the Law.

We are told in Gal 5:1, "Christ has made us free." John recorded in Jn 1:17, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Paul revealed in Gal 3:13, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law."

What a great thought! We are not under the law, but under grace. God gave Israel the Law to show them how to live as His covenant people in the promised land. But the Church is not Israel. We are not under the Mosaic Law.

Does that mean that God endorses lawlessness? The motto of some "Christians" is, "Free from the law, O happy condition, I can sin, and still have remission." In other words, since I am free in Christ, I am free to do whatever I want in life.

Is that true? Obviously not. God does not promote "antinomianism." Jeremiah says that God has written the law on our hearts (Jer 31:33). Jesus introduced a "new commandment" (Jn 13:34). He commanded His disciples to "teach all things whatsoever I have commanded" (Mt 28:20)."

Are we free then? Yes, we are free to follow Christ. We are not free to do our own thing. Rather, we are free to obey the Word of Christ.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

So one extreme view of the law is libertinism. It says we are free from the law to do our own thing. Next, as the pendulum swings the other way, there's another equally dangerous view of the law.

2. *Legalism--We are tied to the Law.*

Legalism was a great problem in Judaism in Jesus' day. The great proponents were the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not official clergymen, but laymen. Many of them were "middle class" merchants and tradesmen. They stood in contrast with the Saducees, who were the religious, aristocrat party. The Pharisees were the party of the common people, and accused the Saducees of being too lax and liberal.

The Pharisees were separatists. The name comes from the Hebrew word "parash" meaning "one who is separate." Often we hear that the Pharisees were the "bad guys." That's true to a point. But don't underestimate their sincerity. The Pharisees had a fervent desire to keep the Law of God, in their own lives, and in their nation.

The problem was that their ambition soon degenerated into legalism. How? The same way it happens in our day, as we'll see in a moment. The Pharisees knew that God had given Israel the Law, namely the Ten Commands. But the problem was that sometimes God's Law raised questions it didn't answer explicitly.

For instance, take the command, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." How do you keep the sabbath day holy? Was God prohibiting athletes from playing sporting events on the sabbath? Are people allowed to work shift-work on the sabbath? Is it Ok to go shopping on the sabbath? God didn't say explicitly. So the Pharisees did.

They didn't want people to break God's Law, so here's what they did. The Pharisees developed a whole tradition, a great list of rules called the "Halakah" (which means "how to walk and live). The Halakah was the Pharisee's interpretation of what God meant. It's incredible how massive this list became. The Pharisee's came up with hundreds and hundreds of "laws" designed to remove any "gray areas" from Jewish life. Their motivation all along was to do the will of God. But somehow, the system mastered the man, rather than the man mastering the system (Hoch, NT Backgrounds). As time passed, their traditions became as authoritative as God's Law.

By the way, why did most of the Pharisees reject Jesus? Because He purposefully didn't keep the Halakah. Remember Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees in Mt 15:3? "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" Then in 15:8-9, "This people draweth near unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

The sad fact is this. Legalism is alive and well today in the Church. There are Christians, often motivated by a sincere desire to please God, who say, "God's Word is Ok, but it's too vague in places. We need a list to clarify the gray areas."

Don't misunderstand. What God commands in His Word, we must do. What He forbids, we must avoid. But what about matters the Bible doesn't address explicitly? The problem with legalism is that it tries to legislate godliness in the "gray areas."

For instance, consider two examples:

God's Command: "Abstain from fornication." I Th 4:3

Legalistic response: "How? That's too vague. We need to be more specific. So to help you flee immorality, here are two rules we'll adopt: Ladies are not allowed to wear shorts in public. Men are not permitted to wear their hair over their ears."

God's Command: "Abstain from every appearance of evil." I Th 5:22

Legalistic response: "What does that mean practically? We'll clarify it. Here's a list that will help you abstain from evil: Don't go to movie theaters. Don't eat at restaurants that serve alcohol."

Please don't misunderstand. We need biblical convictions and standards. And there is nothing wrong with having personal preferences. But, if we are to be biblical, that is what they must remain--personal preferences. We are in grave trouble when we elevate personal preferences to the same level of authority as God's commands.

There are many sincere Christians who say, "Give us a list of rules. I don't like 'gray areas.' Tell us what we should do in black and white terms. And preach that list. That's the only way to keep the church pure and strong."

Will it? Did it keep Judaism strong? Not according to what Jesus said in Matthew 23. What did Jesus say to the religious leaders who "preached lists"? Jesus pronounced seven woes on the Pharisees. What was the problem with their approach? V 13 "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men." V 24 "Ye blind guides who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." V 28 "Even so ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

While libertinism abuses grace, legalism distorts grace. Legalism tries to add to grace. Frankly, the result of legalism is a pride which says, "Since I keep the list, and you don't, I'm more righteous than you are." Libertinism says we are free from the law to do our own thing. Legalism puts us in bondage to the Law. Which is right? What should we think of the law? What does God think of the law? We'll find out in Romans 3 (now we move from the introduction to the body of the sermon!).

Proposition: Romans 3:19-22 reveals three truths about the Law.

Introduction: Two common attitudes towards the Law...

1. Libertinism--We are free from the Law.
 2. Legalism--We are tied to the Law.
- I. Truth #1: The Law is not bad (19).
 - A. It reveals our depravity.
 - B. It reveals our guilt.
 - II. Truth #2: The Law can't save (20).
 - A. The Law demands obedience, but can't enable obedience.
 - B. The Law defines sin, but can't deliver from sin.
 - III. Truth #3: The Law points us to God's remedy (21-22).
 - A. We are not made right with God by the Law (21).
 - B. We are made right with God by faith in Christ (22).

Conclusion: Two key questions...

1. Has your mouth ever been stopped?
2. Has your mouth ever been opened?

I. Truth #1: The Law is not bad (19).

V 19 "Now we know that whatever things the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law..." Notice that the word "law" appears six times in three verses. The Jews prided themselves in the "Law." For some, it was like an insurance policy-- "Since we have the law, we must be Ok with God." Paul disproved that notion in ch 2. But that doesn't mean the law is bad. No, the law is not bad, in fact, it is good. There are at least eight, positive statements about the law in Romans (for example, see: 7:12, 14, 16, 25).

The Law is not bad. God gave it. To whom? V 19 "To them who are under the law," that is, the Jews. Why did God give the Jews the Law? According to v 19, the Law serves two purposes.

A. It reveals our depravity.

V 19 "THAT every mouth may be stopped." The "stopped mouth" is a picture of a defendant in court. A sinner stands before God. He's anxious to state his case. Then the Law is read. After that, when it's his turn to speak, he is speechless. The evidence against him is overwhelming (Cranfield, 67).

The verb "stopped" means "to fence in." On a farm, the fence keeps the cattle from running wild. So the Law is like a fence which stops us short. Because of the Law, no one can say, "I'm Ok with God. I'm really a pretty good person." The Law reveals our shortcomings, our depravity. It also serves a second purpose.

B. It reveals our guilt.

V 19 "and all the world may become guilty before God." Literally, the idea is "become answerable." The NASB puts it like this, "that all the world may become accountable to God." Accountable--now there's a distasteful word in our day! Modern thinking says, "I'm not responsible for my actions." The Law says, "Yes you are."

Paul's opponents in Judaism didn't believe in total depravity. They felt that if they kept the Law, they could gain and maintain a right standing with God. Is that true? Not at all. Once we understand the doctrine of total depravity, it blows away the erroneous thinking that we can reach God by keeping the Law. As J. Vernon McGee put it, "To hold onto the Law is like a man jumping out of an airplane, and instead of taking a parachute, he takes a sack of cement with him (65)."

Which brings us to a second truth about the Law. First, the Law is good, in that it tells us the truth about our condition--it reveals our depravity, and our guilt.

II. Truth #2: The Law can't save (20).

V 20 "Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The Law can't save us. It can't justify us in God's sight. It can't make us right with God (see: Gal 2:16).

Why can't the law save us? Notice two reasons.

A. The Law demands obedience, but can't enable obedience.

Notice the text says "by the deeds of the law" (lit. "by the works of the law"). Nobody will be restored to God by keeping the Law. Why not? Because we are incapable of perfect obedience. We may be impressed with our "goodness" because in we think our good outweighs our bad. But what does God think of us? He tells us in James 2:10, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

The Law demands obedience, but it can't enable us to be obedient. It shows us what we ought to do, but it doesn't give us the power to do it. It shows us where we ought to be, but it can't take us there. There's a second reason the law can't save us.

B. The Law defines sin, but can't deliver from sin.

V 20 "For by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law is helpful. It defines sin. It reveals what sin is. It's like a spotlight that exposes our wickedness. Its brilliant light reveals our inadequacies. It says to us, "This is what sin is."

The Law defines sin, but...it can't deliver us from sin. Though the law is good, it can't redeem. It can't make us right with God.

Objection: Perhaps you're wondering, "Why would God give us something like the Law anyway? If it demands obedience, but doesn't enable us to be obedient, if it defines sin, but doesn't deliver us from sin, why?" The answer is seen in the third truth.

III. Truth #3: The Law points us to God's remedy (21-22).

Suppose you loaned me your several thousand dollar large screen TV. While carrying it into the house, I dropped and broke it. I'm frantic. I run to the store and buy a massive book, "How to Fix a Broken Large Screen TV." It's a massive book. As I scan the pages, I soon discover three things. One, I don't have the right tools to fix it. Two, I don't have the know-how nor the ability to fix it. The third thing I discover is this. I'm in trouble!

Let me ask you something. Was the book bad? No. It just revealed and reinforced my predicament! Now suppose at the bottom of the manual, I saw these words, "If the TV is damaged, call this 800 number, and a serviceman will repair your TV no questions asked, at no charge." But I was bull-headed, and ignored the guarantee, and said, "I'll fix this thing myself. I don't need any help!" You'd say I was crazy.

Yet so it is with the Law. The Law is like that manual. It's good, but it can't save. It reveals the problem, but it is powerless to fix the problem. But it does something else. The Law points us to God's remedy.

V 21 "But now the righteousness of God apart from the Law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." Don't miss that. The Law is a witness. It tells us where to find God's remedy.

God's remedy is this. God has provided for us what we could not obtain on our own. What is that? Righteousness. V 21 begins the second major section of Romans.

In it, we learn about how to obtain this "righteousness." To benefit from God's remedy, we must make two admissions.

A. We are not made right with God by the Law (21).

Most non-Christians feel that God is a God of justice. "I may not be perfect, but God will accept me because of my works. I'm not nearly as bad as many Christians I know." Is that true?

Notice v 21. God's righteousness comes "apart from the law." How is a person made right with God? By the Law? By works? By religious activity? By good deeds? By being baptized? By joining a church? No. We can't earn God's righteousness. If we want it, we must admit that WE are powerless to do anything to get it. How, then, can we be made right with God?

B. We are made right with God by faith in Christ (22).

V 22 "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." For thousands of years, since Adam's fall, man's sins were held in a bankvault, waiting for Christ. When Christ died and rose again, He emptied the vault. He secured righteousness.

How do we receive this righteousness? By faith in Jesus Christ (22). Who may receive it? Anyone who believes (22), regardless of race, gender, and economic status. In God's sight, when it comes to being made right with God, there is no difference. We are made right with God by faith in Christ.

If that is true, then I need to ask you two key questions.

Conclusion: Two key questions...

1. Has your mouth ever been stopped? (Wiersbe, 522)

V 19 says God gave the Law to "stop our mouths," to bring us to the point where we'd admit our guilt before God. No more excuses, just a silent admission of utter depravity before God. Has your mouth ever been stopped?

2. Has your mouth ever been opened?

Have you ever called out to Jesus Christ? Have you ever admitted your need for Him? Have you ever stopped boasting of your own self-righteousness and placed your faith in His righteousness?

Can your mouth sing these words, penned by Charles Wesley? "No condemnation now I dread: Jesus and all in Him is mine! Alive in Him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine, bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown through Christ my own." Open your mouth and trust Christ today.