

“What Use Is It?”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Sermon for 13 February 2022
 Texts: Galatians 3:19-22

Peter was quite sure he knew himself. He did not. Jesus did.

23 Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

And what did Jesus know?

Matt. 15:19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, [a]fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20 These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

Matt. 26:34 Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”

Of what did Peter’s denial consist? It was a threefold *disowning* of his Lord. Peter falsely believed that he would come off better than the rest of the disciples.

Peter was wrong about himself—too proud, too confident. Jesus replies, in essence, “Nay, you shall come off worse than the others—excepting Judas; you will disown me ahead of everyone else. ***You will do your worst.***” He might have added, “And if I did not love you, and had I not prayed for you, Peter, you would have utterly failed and disgraced yourself. Satan has desired to have you. I have not allowed it. I know these things and I know you better than you know yourself.” Ah, Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Always. Thank God.

When I think of disowning, being disowned, something that is very present and painful to remember, I think of the parable of the two sons, or the Prodigal Son . . . or, as some theologian rephrased it, the Parable of the Father’s Prodigious Love! What society proscribed for such a son, one who so notoriously abused his father, saying, “I wish you were dead, Dad. Just give me what I have coming to me.” And with that he gathered up his wealth, his portion of the inheritance and left for a far country to live as he pleased, and do what he wanted. He deserved to be disowned. Actually, taken to the city gate and stoned to death. *But that isn’t what happened.* The son dissed, or *disowned* his father; but the father did not reciprocate in kind. Instead, with persistent love the father waited for his son’s return . . . his love never ceased. Such was the Lord’s love for Peter. Such is God’s love for his lost children. They have sinned, turned their backs on God—yes disowned God. God knows all about that. He does not reciprocate in kind. Instead of giving us what we deserve, judgment and rejection—disowning us!—God sends his Son in mercy to win us back. *But before God sent his Son he sent his law.* The law was an expression of the love of God given to bring us to our senses. God knows us better than we know ourselves. And that is a very great thing. Paul also says that God showed his love in that, prior to sending the law, he sent the covenant of promise. Salvation history is promise, law and gospel. Behind the question, “Will you have Jesus for your Savior?” lies the prior questions; namely, will you obey My law? Will you own the covenant of promise? Each question is a mile post on the way to heaven.

The world is full, I think, of people who feel disowned. Orphans feel it, felons feel it. The divorced feel it . . . the poor and marginalized feel it. And where people are discriminated against socially, racially, or ethnically that rejection sits easily with being disowned. Hosea felt disowned by Homer, the woman at the well felt disowned by her five husbands even **the man she was with who was not her husband**. They had all disowned her, but Jesus would not! Exiles and refugees all know what being disowned is composed of.

Emma Lazarus in her tribute to the statue of liberty captured the spirit of this in her poem "The New Colossus":

. . . her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

"Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (on display since 1903) is the most familiar portion of this startlingly American Italian sonnet. But "world-wide welcome" resonates somewhat of the father of the prodigal's love and the invitation to salvation issued by the Lord Jesus.

He declares that "The kingdom of God is a big tent for the disowned and dispossessed peoples of the world." *For sinners seeking salvation*. The harm of our current divisiveness and hateful rhetoric is such that it increases the multitudes of the oppressed.

Pray for the truckers in Canada who are being vilified and disowned by their government. Keep their yearning for freedom alive and pure and strong! Satan wishes to oppress us, as usual, and he has helpers. Pray for America, I say, that is struggling with messaging that degrades half the country for political gain. And let us persist in loving God and one another regardless. The Father's welcome home is ours to declare.

But my essential point in Galatians is this: spiritually, all sinners everywhere feel disowned. It is precisely at the place where they realize they are sinners. Then they have to come to their senses, of necessity like the prodigal son. The gift of the law is that it convinces us of *the sinfulness of sin* and brings conviction leading to repentance: we are lost sinners. We conclude this, we begin to look for rescue.

If the law was never intended for man's justification and salvation, Paul's message here, what was its purpose? Or, put more bluntly, what use is it?

Paul has just proved, brilliantly, what the law was not for and his insight into the matter pushes the need for a recalibration of our thinking about the law. Now, the truth

is that I have had to overcome considerable resistance to setting forth the usefulness of the law. (It is almost as if I would rather talk about something else! Anything else.) However, that reluctance is not a good thing—if our purpose is to work our way through Galatians and seek a deeper understanding of matters arising in the Galatian setting because, as we are quite aware that getting a handle on Paul's meaning will yield solid benefits to us in our setting. Benefits like understanding, gratitude and meaningful praise.

I wonder if it is the unpleasantness of the law's actual purpose that has tempted me to deflection. My reluctance may have caused several false starts, along with several balks!

Apparently one purpose of the law is also to remind us that this world ***is a world of moral consequence***. When I say that, I am pursuing the thought of sin, or of sin's consequence in our fundamentally moral universe. There is right and wrong, up and down. "Sin" is the biblical diagnosis of what's wrong with this fallen world, and the addressing of sin is what it takes for things to be made right, to be rectified. Sin is not just bad decisions, or naughty acts; it is the power behind them, the motivational force towards compulsory evil!

The law makes us aware of our complicity in sin. We have all sinned, all have fallen short and the law provokes us to consider the guilt, shame and condemnation of sin. There will be judgment. There is the wrath of an offended God who is pre-eminently just. Because of that we are taught that there is a final judgment, all sin must be addressed and punished and the rest will be resolution. Wrongs will be righted, the wicked will be punished and only those who repent, trust in the offer of salvation and put themselves under the blood of Jesus will get into heaven. Those are some pretty heavy thoughts.

Now if it is true that sin brings consequences (and it does), we also have to consider that the consequences are significant . . . some, very weighty. As weighty as damnation—**the wages of sin are death**. Damnation is an *eternal consequence for unbelief*, for unbelief is connected to the repudiation of God's free offer of forgiveness through the life, death and resurrection of his Beloved Son. Or, through the work of the cross, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Those of a more breezy temperament, of more sunny dispositions are put off by all this judgment, punishment, atonement and sacrificial stuff. Like I said, unpleasantness.

But if our flight to Jesus, our repairing to his arms necessitates, or requires conviction of sin (yes, accountability, guilt, or shame over our sin—or, put another way, if we are made aware of how we have offended, hurt and injured God *and that sense of ourselves is the first step towards redemption, it would be really good to know that!*) That is what Paul says the function of the law is actually: to bring a conviction of sin and a related sense of ourselves as sinners about. We must be aware of a need for rescue before we can grasp our need for a Savior. The law was given to drive us to our knees—to obliterate any sense of self-righteousness, or pride of ourselves as "good people!" I am describing the monster that we become when we presume to be "innocent" and so repel God, his love, his justice, his judicial authority over the whole of creation. All creation fell in the fall of man. We took it all down with ourselves. And we accomplished that by sinning, sinning defiles everything. From that we gather that if

everything has been defiled by sin, there is universe-wide need for cleansing, purification and redemption. It is not just about us. It is not just about me either; it never was. Now this is to say, the problem is neither natural, nor psychological in nature. It is supernatural and spiritual. To correct a spiritual disorder, we must utilize spiritual means.

The law is a spiritual means. It flows from the perfect plan of God for the redemption and restoration of all things. It is helpful to think of it as a stage in the unfolding of salvation history. The law is one of the highest works of God; in fact the giving of the law on Sinai towers in the annals of history. The sense of law that exists everywhere was summed up sublimely in the ordinances, precepts and commandments that flowed from God to His people through the mediation of Moses. The promise of God was formerly mediated to us through Abraham, but God's covenant relationship to us is notched up, or take to a whole new level with the giving of the law.

The description of that bestowal is terrifying: thunder and lightnings and earthquakes and fire. There were barriers to hold back the people from the death dealing power of divine majesty. That's right. People would die if they broke through and drew too close. At this stage God graciously protected us from all that we lacked the capacity to encounter, or endure. The holiness of God is dangerous, God is all-powerful. Therefore, keeping our distance until God drew near to us in mercy was true wisdom. The wrath of God is a frightful, and frightening thing.

The law served as a safe, prescribed way to navigate our relationship to God. It was a moral code. It contained clear directives related to our behavior towards God, and, frankly, one another. The dual focus is and remains a central feature. How we treat God shapes our human interactions and how we treat each other is something we must answer to with God. The "Thou shalt not's" and the "Thou shalt's" which we were commanded to know and obey—in spirit and to the letter—supplied guidance on how we ought to live. The law serves as guard rails on the highway of life. They keep us from crashing into walls, as well as from careening into chasms.

When we sinned, or transgressed the law, guilt resulted. Yes, as well as shame and fear of punishment. These emotional categories are serviceable to us. They define our spiritual life. What we do with the guilt we accrue, how we shed the shame that appears when we fail—it falls on us, humbles us!—and what must happen for us to escape punishment, are dynamics very familiar to us. They express how we were designed to live under God's moral governance.

While it is impossible for us to keep the law perfectly, it is not impossible for us to keep the law. There are degrees of compliance. Only one has ever kept the law perfectly and we depend on His perfect obedience *because we are sad when, by faith, His work, His obedience and His righteousness are imputed to us. Yes, we get into heaven on His pass!* That is what God in His graciousness has secured for us by way of the Gospel. The Gospel is not the law. The Gospel is all that God has done to save us. And, yes, this deliverance is another notching up of salvation history—in comparison to the law, it is a quantum leap! The law was high, the Gospel is highest.

The law was the stern messenger of God's vengeance on sin, revolt and rebellion; it was sent into the world to prepare us for the best *which was yet to come*. The law is

love in a condemning tone, the Gospel is love in forgiveness. The law speaks to the conscience but the Gospel speaks to our entire consciousness, to our transformed being, to our redeemed selves. The law slays any hope of salvation by reformation.

- Not only do we fail to keep our resolutions, but
- We learn that future obedience cannot make up for past disobedience.

And that is partially because perfect obedience in the future is just as impossible as it is in the present. What we run into is our incapacity, our inability . . . and the resultant despair is meant to drive us into the welcoming arms of Jesus.

Falling short, repetitious failure, lack of success all have the effect of making us miserable . . . and *misery* has this redemptive purpose; it compels me to cry out to Jesus. My futility thus fuels my hope.

And just in time, for the great white throne judgment of the Savior is approaching, drawing nearer and nearer. And on that day everyone will be there! There will be no boasting! No vaunting of our piety, our good works, our achievements . . . we will not boast for our poverty will be evident before all. Even the best among us will not measure up to the fullness that is in Christ. But, strangely, this admission appears to stimulate glorification, it completes our sanctification. When we look up from looking down we will see how like unto Him He has made us!

He that approaches boldly the throne of grace will proclaim, **Who is he who condemneth? It is Christ that died, rather, that has risen again.** He vouches for me, He declares, "This one is Mine." And the Father, smiling, reaches out His hand and says, **Come, ye blessed, enter the kingdom prepared for you.**

And, at that moment the full value of your Savior will dawn on you! The severity of the law will dissipate. How holy must Christ have been to obey all these for me! Jesus is the passport to heaven . . . His grace ushers me in. Then it will dawn on you the folly of any and all self-righteousness. Even the memory of that will fade. There will be no thought of how you achieved eternal life! You will exult in the great, surpassing righteousness of Jesus—far above that of the Pharisees and the Sadducees! You may even explain, "Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord!"

"Oh, that the Holy Spirit would lead you to believe, so that you may, at once, escape the wrath to come and proceed to paradise . . . and find your place among the blessed.

Amen.