



**Galatians 3:15-25**  
**A Promise Given**

Summary: Religious rules help us see how much we need God to make and fulfill promises to us.

Living here in Northern Virginia, many of us are familiar with applications, evaluations, and the competitive selection process. Whether it's for a job, a promotion, a sports team, or even a room to rent, we're familiar with putting together a package, going through an interview, or having a tryout. And it all revolves around the question: are you good enough, do you have what we're looking for, are you the right match, right now?

So, we're used to thinking in terms of what we've done, what we've experienced, what we can bring to the team, our skills and strengths.

Here's the down side of that: it doesn't mesh with the gospel because God doesn't look at your religious resume before offering you a spot on His team.

A coach wants to know what you can do, she's filling a specific position in the lineup. The promotion board needs to know if you're ready for additional responsibility this year. The selection committee needs someone who can start in two weeks. They're all looking for someone who is ready to go.

But God isn't concerned with what you've done or how far you've made it. He's not impressed by your performance at all. He's willing to work with you. He's willing to receive you, accept you, take you in, and *then* shape you, mold you, and make you into the man or woman you were created to be.

And it has nothing to do with your potential. It has nothing to do with the quality of your application or the skills you demonstrate, it's just who He is: gracious, merciful, loving, scandalously generous.

We've seen all this in Galatians as Paul makes a counter-argument to early Christians. They've been told that if they really love Jesus, they'll prove it by following all the religious rules God gave Moses. In other words, they'll pull together a really nice religious resume and tighten up their spiritual game because God really likes peak performers.

But Paul says that's not true. He reminds the Galatians: they found radical acceptance and spiritual transformation by responding to the Gospel. They were accepted by God on the basis of what Jesus had done, not on their own merit. *Friends you have to know that*, it's absolutely essential – they found acceptance on the basis of what Jesus had done and not on their own merit.

And when they were accepted, things changed in their lives. They received the Holy Spirit. There was a before and after – a time when they did not have the Spirit, and now, they did.

Paul points to this experience to make his point. He asked them:

**Galatians 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

In other words, if everything began with the grace of God, why would you try to make it about personal performance now?

Well, to be fair, some people were tempted because there are some pretty significant sections of Scripture that are all about personal performance – this long list of things you should do and things you shouldn't do. It was known as the law of Moses and contained things like the Ten Commandments. That stuff all seems to be about performance, so how does it fit into our life with Christ?

That's the question Paul answers as we continue our study. He's already reminded them that Abraham was saved by faith, not by keeping religious rules – in fact, he was saved by faith *hundreds of years* before the rules were given when God made him a promise, a covenant. And you can't change that covenant after it's been made. Read with me,

**Galatians 3:15** Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though *it is* only a man's covenant, yet *if it is* confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.  
16 Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "*And to your Seed,*" who is Christ. 17 And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. 18 For if the inheritance *is* of the law, *it is* no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise.

Now, that says a lot of things, but what's really important for you to see is this: if God made a promise to Abraham, by covenant, He's not going to change it hundreds of years later. You don't do that with human documents. You don't change your grandpa's will because you don't like what he left to your cousin. If the promise is made, it stands.

So what was the promise God made? It was a promise to save Abraham *by faith* and to use him as a source of blessing to all nations. And we have to say this again and make it really clear: it wasn't because Abraham went through a rigorous selection process. It wasn't because he attracted God's attention early with his performance. It wasn't because he wrote a really good essay or showed some potential. He never applied for the position. God came to him, and he responded by faith.

Now Abraham lived at a time when covenants were a more common thing. Today we might have contracts or agreements we sign, but back then binding decisions were made by covenant. And one common way to do that, especially for something really significant was

to cut an animal in half and lay each side on the ground. Then the two people making the covenant would hold hands and walk through the middle with half the animal on each side. They were effectively saying, may this be what happens to me if I ever break this covenant. And then, they would roast the meat and share a meal together symbolizing their unity and friendship.

In Genesis 15 you find God making a covenant with Abraham. God comes to him and makes promises to him, 'Abraham, these are things I'm going to do for you.' And Abraham says, 'How can I know this? How can I know you're going to do what you promise to do?' And God says, 'Bring a cow, a goat, a dove and a pigeon and prepare a covenant ceremony for us.' And so Abraham does. He butchers the animals and lays them out.

And then, he sits there, and waits. Vultures come and he has to drive them off, and he waits. Night falls and God hasn't shown up. Finally, Abraham falls asleep and then God shows up and repeats all the terms of the Promise He has made to Abraham, all the things He has promised to do, and a fire passes down the path between the two halves of the animals.

Normally both parties would walk through, they were making an agreement with each other – this is your part of the deal, this my part of the deal, these are the terms to the agreement. But God took it all on Himself and made a single-sided covenant. It was all promise, no contract. There were no performance measures for Abraham, except to believe. And this was the birth of the Jewish nation.

Abraham would have Isaac, who would have Jacob, whose name would be changed to Israel. And he would have twelve sons, who formed twelve tribes, and birthed a nation. And out of one of those tribes, Judah – where we get the word Jewish - would come king David, and eventually, King Jesus born to a virgin named Mary in a town called Bethlehem.

He was the Seed, singular, that God promised would come through the line of Abraham. He would grow up to become not just the Promise maker, and original Promise Keeper, but He would become the lamb that was slain, the sacrifice that was made so we could receive the promises made by God. Jesus was the final confirmation of the covenant God single-handedly made to forgive us fully, freely, and forever, on the basis of His grace and not our religious performance.

All of that is very good news. But in between there was all this stuff about Moses and the law and the commandments. And what do we do with that? That was the question, and Paul is going to answer.

**Galatians 3:19** What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.* 20 Now a mediator does *not mediate* for one *only*, but God is one.

21 *Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.* 22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in

Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

So you have two things – a promise, and the law. Martin Luther pointed out that in the Promise to Abraham God says ‘This is what I’m going to do for you.’ Over and over He says, ‘I will, I will, I will.’ Remember, He walked through the carcasses of the covenant alone. But in the Law of Moses God says, ‘Thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt not’ – it’s all what’s expected of you. So how do you put these two things together? Do they even fit?

The answer is yes, but you have to remember the order. First there was the Promise, what God would do for us, *then* there was the Law, how we should live for God. They go together, but only in the right order. The law, all the religious rules, was never meant to stand alone.

When you pull the Promise away from the Law you’re left with something entirely performance based and horrible because none of us really want to be accepted on the basis of performance and achievement alone. There is a certain thrill to being promoted, to earning a spot on the team, to being accepted into the elite, the competitive, the prestigious position. It makes you feel good, it gives you a sense of pride and identity – IF you can make it, and IF you can keep it.

But sooner or later, we all run up against our limits – you don’t make the cut. You get the call or the letter that says, thank you for your interest, but apply again next time. Or, you phase out, it was good while it lasted but now it’s time to move on. Then what? You sit around and tell stories about how good you used to be? If your identity and acceptance are entirely performance based, then you’re only as good as your performance.

And when it comes to religious performance, you’re never going to impress God. You could never earn a spot on His team. Listen to what Scripture says:

(vs 21) if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.

If that was possible. If you could make the cut, then that’s the way God would do it -

22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So, you can try to find your place in life based on performance – which is always going to fail at some point, both in the eyes of God and your fellow human beings, or you can find your place based on promise. And if your identity and acceptance are based on promise, then you’re as secure as the source of the promise and in this case, the source is God.

And then, *once you’re safe and secure in the promise*, now we can talk about performance. Because remember, the same God who made the promise, also gave the law which was all

based on performance. Why? Well, we see at least three things said in this passage. First the Law was given because of transgressions, to show people their sins. It was also a source of confinement, a jailer, a spiritual prison, and third, it was a tutor, a teacher, a trainer.

So, the Law was given to show people how to live. But it wasn't a training manual, a list of drills to master in order to ace the tryouts, it was more like a playbook. It wasn't a way to make the team, but more like, now that you're on the team, this is how we work. God does have expectations. There are things you should and should not do.

But, you could never do them on your own. That's what is meant by the law as a jailer, as a source of confinement. If you take a good look at God's expectations, you realize pretty quickly how drastically you fail. God told Israel exactly how to live, and if you read their history you realize they never, ever, did it very well.

They knew what to do, they just wouldn't do it. They just couldn't do it. It wasn't an issue of ignorance – they knew the standards, but it was an issue of motivation and performance, they either didn't want to do it, or couldn't do it well enough and some people just didn't even try. And we've said before, many of us know exactly what that is like. There's something in your life that you really want – it could be something you want to add to your life or something you want to evict from your life – and so you come up with a plan, this is how I'm going to make that happen.

And you try. And you try. But you fail. Or, it works for a while, but it's never enough. You can't get what you want, become what you want, keep or kick out what you want and have it work long-term. You need help. That's what the Law was meant to show you – God offers you a promise, *and you need it!*

The law was meant to show us that independence was never going to work. It's great for a country but horrible for a human being. We're meant to be dependent on God. We're meant to run on grace and mercy not performance and grit. The Law was meant to break us, to force us to recognize and admit our failures.

Now, here is something very interesting that relates all of this to our modern times. Today you have a lot of people who think that moral education is the key to a good society, to humane, ethical living. You can pick any issue that plagues society from sexual assault and harassment to issues of equality, prejudice, and bias and a significant part of our culture's response is education and training.

Many of the dominant voices in our society believe that you fix a problem with education and training. This is why you have mandated training on all sorts of issues at work or at school. There is this belief that education is the path to change. If we tell people this is wrong, and help them see it, they'll change. If you teach people what is right, then truth and justice will prevail and human beings will flourish.

But is that what we see happening? Do thick handbooks and annual training stomp out bad behaviors? No. You may see a reduction, but do you see real, durable, lasting change? No. Why? Because education, often, does not change the heart.

And look, you see this in countless forms.

A few weeks ago the Governor of California was embarrassed when pictures came out of him dining at a fancy restaurant with a crowd of people – none of them wearing masks, while he’s signing orders saying the rest of the state shouldn’t do that. He knows what’s right. He determined it!

The next day the mayor of San Francisco attended a birthday party *at the same restaurant*, which could not have happened if the restaurant was inside the San Francisco city limits *because she signed an order prohibiting this kind of thing*.

Then, you may have seen the incident where a Los Angeles County Supervisor voted to ban outdoor dining and was *spotted 3 hours later* dining at a restaurant outdoors. The mayor of San Jose, another large city in California, posted a tweet the day before Thanksgiving about the need to be safe on and then attended a Thanksgiving dinner with family that violated the state’s restrictions on social gatherings.

And you say, well, that’s just COVID. How about this? Back in 2013, the head of sexual assault and abuse prevention for the Air Force was arrested. For what? Sexual assault! In the parking lot of a bar right over here in Arlington.

So why am I bringing all of this up? To point out the fact that it wasn’t that people didn’t know better. It wasn’t that they lacked education and training. *They knew what was right, but the knowledge didn’t change them.*

Friends rules are not all bad, but they don’t change the heart. And I need to be super clear and make sure you heard me, so I’ll say it again: rules, handbooks, training, seminars, are not all bad, but they don’t have the power to sufficiently transform the human heart.

And so, have you noticed there are always penalties and punishments associated with rules? No one really believes you change behavior with just training – it’s got to be *mandatory training*, and there has to be consequences for violating the rules. You’re seeing this happen right now with COVID. First, it was just encourage people to wear a mask. Then it was tell people to wear a mask. Then it was tell people to wear a mask and if they don’t there’s going to be a fine. When education and communication don’t sufficiently change behavior, you search for a way to make non-compliance hurt.

Friends, this is how the law works. It tells you what to do, or what not to do, but it’s powerless to help you change or obey. Rules and punishments can force people into compliance, but they can’t produce true transformation and change.

I've heard it put this way – the law is like a cage: it can keep a lion from eating a lamb, but not from *wanting* to eat it.

You can use rules and penalties to build a polite and civilized family, organization, or even community, but what you've actually built is just a good cage, if you remove the rules and the punishments, how long will things last?

We need more than instruction; we need salvation and transformation. I need more than just rules and restraints to keep me from certain things, I need a heart change so that I don't want those things anymore, or, so that there is something I want *even more*.

And that is why the Law is not just a cage, it's not just confinement, it's also a tutor – meant to show me what to do with my sin. Before Christ came the answer was to make sacrifices, but you pretty quickly realize there is no way you can make enough of those to keep up with the pace of your failures. I fail faster and farther than I can sacrifice. I'm trapped. And hopefully I realize how much I need the promise of God and not my own performance.

The Law helps us see who we really are and that helps us see who Christ really is.

People often want the joy, peace, and acceptance they hear about at church. But they're not willing to admit how bad they really are, they're not willing to admit the seriousness of their own faults and failures. Some people come to church feeling like they're already a pretty good person and they just need to be around some other pretty good people because this world can really get you down.

The law helps to expose all of that. It puts us through a tryout and interview that we can't we pass. It shows that even if you were a standout in your circle, you're just not ready for this level. And then, once we've been humbled and humiliated, once we learn we can't do this on our own, we're ready to see how great God's mercy and grace are.

So I want to ask a serious question right now, in light of everything we've talked about this morning. Are you religious but restless? Have you been trying to follow some religious rules to make your life better? Are you trying hard to be a good person? Are you trying to make some changes in your life, but failing? Is it possible that you're trying to live by personal performance when God offers you a promise of grace? Is it possible that you're trying to find rules, but not depending on God for strength?

Is it possible that, like the Galatians, you're living in your flesh, and not God's Spirit? You were never meant to live that way. You're never going to be able to change, never going to find real peace, never going to be transformed, apart from the grace of Christ.

You need to start by understanding that all your failures, all your weaknesses, all your hurts and hangups, all the reasons you could never make the team on your own, have been dealt with in Christ.

Listen to the promise of Scripture:

**Romans 8:1** *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

There are two ways to live – by flesh, according to performance, or by the Spirit, according to the promise. Which one is you?

The truth is you probably vacillate a little bit don't you? There's a little Galatia in us all, a little tendency to forget about the promises of God and try to live by the rules on our own.

Meanwhile, Paul reminds us of a better way to live when he says:

**Gal 2:20** *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*

I don't know if you've recognized it or not, but I'm trying to hammer this truth deep into your soul and I hope that each week it moves in a little deeper. The hope of the gospel is not what you have done for God, but what He has done for you. You live, not by your own strength, but depending on His strength in you. And you receive all of this, not by your exceptional performance, but through humble faith in a God who loves you and sacrifices for you.

You don't need more education and training, you don't need another set of drills and skills, another cycle or season to prepare for the next evaluation or screening – you need to rest in the promises of God, the promise that He loves you and gave Himself for you, long before you could ever do anything for Him. Start there. Start with the promise, and performance will fall into place and when it does, it will feel like a joy to serve, not a burden to keep. The Christian faith is not God asking what you can do for Him, it's God sharing what He has done for you – *[bringing] us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*

Let's pray.