

## *"Freedom - The Promise and the Law"*

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 15 January 2006 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Galatians 3:15-25
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Galatians 3:15-29 Genesis 15: 1-6; 17: 9-10
<b><u>Songs</u></b>	from Mission Praise: 756, 673, 367, 708 from The Source; 309, 329, 330
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If I were to ask you what governs your life,  
I wonder what would be your answer.

You might well say,  
    my family,  
        my children,  
            my religion,  
                my work,  
                    my dog,  
                        my Christianity.

There are in fact many things which govern our lives.  
    Our place in society,  
        our brain power,  
            our intellectual capability,  
                the quickness of our minds,  
                    all have an effect.

Whether we are rich or poor,  
    educated or uneducated,  
    privileged or deprived .....

One of the largest influences is the culture of our society.  
    It constrains us  
        and projects views and ideas that we catch like influenza.  
It presents modern values as the right thing to do and be.  
    It influences our perspective on the issues of our day.

But what actually governs your life is your world view.  
    You will react to the impulses on your life  
        in accordance with how you see the world.

If you are an evolutionist,  
you may well accept that values evolve,  
that they change with time  
and we have to give up the norms of the past.  
If you believe that God created the worlds then you will see things differently.  
You may believe that the standards of God are immutable and unchanging.  
If you are a humanist then you may well have a low view of authority.  
Indeed I submit that materialistic humanism is responsible for the low view of  
authority in our society today.  
You can deduce a concept of authority from Christianity,  
but I can see no way you can deduce it from humanism,  
where man is king,  
yet no-one is king.

But what governs the moral code by which *you* live?  
How do *you* decide whether something is right or wrong?  
Do you believe, as many do,  
that we each have a different moral code by which we live,  
hence we are free from the charge of immorality  
because we are true to our own code,  
or do you think that there is a moral code to which all men should subscribe?

For myself, my moral code is based, as far as I am able,  
on the teachings of the Bible.

My Christian faith,  
my high view of God  
and my view that the Bible is the Word of God  
mean that I take seriously what it says,  
and however poorly I may achieve my aim  
I apply its teachings to my personal life,  
the way I govern and lead my family,  
how I conduct and fulfil my role  
both in the church and in secular society.  
I allow its values,  
however imperfectly  
to influence my thinking  
and my behaviour.

But we are also constrained by the law of the land.

At a fundamental level,  
British law is based on the ten commandments.  
If we go back a few centuries we can see the influence of the Church  
and of Christianity  
on the laws of our land.

But we have over many years departed from Biblical values.  
One glaring instance is that adultery,  
condemned in the Bible,

is practiced openly in our society  
and there is no law against it.

And increasingly, laws are being created which move further and further away from Christian values.

An example of this is that though marriage is protected by law,  
same sex unions,  
which are against Biblical teaching,  
have now been legalised by creating civil partnerships,  
incorrectly referred to by the media as marriages.

But the burning question is,  
how does our moral behaviour,  
or indeed our moral beliefs,  
the code by which we seek to maintain our morality,  
affect our standing before a Holy God?

Our passage today forms a tiny part of the apostle Paul's argument to the Galatians regarding the basis on which God will accept us,  
the basis of our justification  
and our resultant behaviour.

Last week we saw the foolishness of trying to keep the Jewish law as a means of satisfying God's demands.

The case was made that we simply cannot keep it perfectly.  
And only perfection is good enough.

And so it is with us.

Whatever our moral code,  
whatever our creed,  
whatever our religion,  
we know that we cannot keep it perfectly.

Every religion has this dilemma.

And if you are not careful,  
your life becomes governed by the urgent need to attain to the  
perfection desired or demanded by the relevant god.

In his book the 'Killing Fields – Living Fields', Don Cormack describes how the people of Cambodia were conditioned by their religion, in these words:

The hope was to build up sufficient merit to be better off in the next reincarnation, and move a step closer to Nirvana.

One would continue to die and be reborn, moving up and down in an all night game of spiritual snakes-and-ladders, through many levels of hell, the world of animals and humans and heaven, until at some distant time, having quelled all desire and 'thirst for life', ..... one might gain access to 'Nirvana' - the ultimate state of blissful non-existence.

*Killing fields Living fields by Don Cormack, Monarch books - p 30.*

Same branches of the Christian religion  
though no-where near so obvious

lead to the same position,  
where the believer is always striving for perfection.

But true Christianity makes no such demands.  
Of course we seek to serve our Lord,  
but we serve out of love.  
Never should we serve in any sense to achieve merit with God.  
Firstly, there is no need;  
Secondly, this is not what God wants

As we noted a few weeks ago,  
the Jews were so frightened of failing to keep one single item of the Law  
that they created a vast array of even tighter laws to protect them,  
like an outer hedge,  
from even getting near to breaking one of the laws,  
and it was this excessive legality which Jesus so roundly condemned  
when he was here.

Yet even then,  
they failed to keep the law perfectly.  
Hence there has to be another way if God is to accept us at all.

The modern question of whether God exists is not addressed here.  
His existence is taken as a given.  
What is under discussion is what we have to do, if anything,  
to be reconciled to the God who is.

So Paul homes in on the promise to Abraham,  
arguing that the principle of justification by faith in God  
pre-dated the giving of the Law.

So in the bit of the argument we look at this evening,  
he compares the nature of the promise of God with the function of the law.

As we saw last week Paul refers back to Abraham,  
where “Abraham believed God and he credited to him as righteousness.”  
(Genesis 15:6)

Hence “those who believe are children of Abraham.” (Galatians 3:7)  
and “those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Galatians 3:9)

To get the full force of this you need to go back to **Genesis**  
and read all of God’s promises to Abraham from **chapter 12 onwards**.

But here Paul likens God’s promise to a legal agreement,  
which no third party can just walk in and destroy.

The promise precedes circumcision,  
which was part of God’s covenant with Abraham,  
and it precedes the law which was given,  
according to Paul, 430 years later.

So the law, whatever its merits,  
cannot supersede a promise which has never been revoked.  
Therefore the promise stands  
that those who believe are credited with righteousness  
and all nations, Jews and Gentiles alike, are blessed through him.

I guess that all this stuff about Abraham, the Jews and the Jewish law seems pretty irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,  
where the items at the front of our minds as a nation are things like ASBO's,  
licensing laws,  
sex offenders being employed in schools,  
law & order,  
the NHS,  
the next leader of the liberal party,  
the war in Iraq,  
and nuclear proliferation in Iran.

But as Christians,  
we need to understand our Bibles if we are ever to understand our faith.  
And the reason we study Galatians is because the idea that we are saved by grace  
and not by good deeds  
is not only central to our faith,  
but truly liberating.

As Jesus said to his followers when he was here,  
“you will know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:31)

Now that reminds me.  
There was a programme on the radio 4 last Tuesday, around 9 in the morning,  
entitled ‘Who killed Christianity?’  
Apparently there will be a series of these for the next 4 or five weeks.  
It was only 15 minutes,  
but to my utter amazement,  
the first man accused was the Apostle Paul.

The accusation was that Paul's ministry did not reflect the ministry of Jesus.  
That he preached a different Gospel.

So I was delighted to find as I studied this week,  
that it was Jesus himself who first used this argument about Abraham,  
when he confronted the unbelieving Jews in **John 8**.

They were claiming to be Abraham's descendants,  
and Jesus says that if they were truly Abraham's children,  
they would believe him, as Abraham believed God  
and they would not be trying to kill him.

So we see that in the mind of Jesus,  
to be a child of Abraham is not a question of human descent,

but of being obedient to God  
and receiving the inheritance of justification by faith  
in the promises of God  
made all those centuries ago to Abraham, the man of faith.

If then the law of God is incapable of superseding the promise of God,  
why is it there?

Why did God give it to Moses on mount Sinai?

This law, which has inspired nations and individuals throughout the centuries,  
is it of any value at all?

Indeed is it opposed to the gospel of grace?

Not at all, says Paul.

It was necessary to lead us to Christ.

Like all that God does, it had its place.

It is an expression of the requirements of a just and holy God.

If we had no law

we would have difficulty recognising sin.

In our rebellion against God

we needed to know where to find a statement of the standards which he  
requires.

It itself did not and could not supersede the promises of God to Abraham.

If anything it backed them up,

because it required a standard of perfection,

which we in our sinful state could not and cannot attain.

Hence we are always on our knees seeking forgiveness for our wrongdoing.

But when Christ came of whom the promise spoke,

then the Law was itself superseded.

He was the only one who ever kept the Law perfectly,

which qualified him as the perfect sacrifice for sin

and enabled the Father to pour out the judgement for sin on him,

so that we might be saved by grace and not by law.

So until Christ came,

all mankind was imprisoned by a law he couldn't keep.

The law preserved us,

it taught us,

it gave a standard to aim for,

but it imprisoned us in sin.

Because we couldn't attain its requirements,

we were constantly guilty.

But when Jesus came,

we were released from the bondage,

for we were forgiven and allowed to walk free.

In fact not only that,

but God made us his sons and daughters,

not on the basis of our achievements,  
but on the basis of forgiveness and God's mercy and grace.

So, how then should we live?

Given that we are saved by grace,  
how shall we use our new found freedom.

All this is the stuff of later chapters in Galatians,  
but suffice to say that Jesus said,  
"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

We now live in the love of God.  
We seek to do right to please him  
out of love.  
We no longer stand in fear of his wrath.  
He knows our imperfections and our failures  
and he loves to have the power to forgive.

No longer do we need to feel guilty all the time,  
for when we sin we are able to confess our failures to a holy God  
and receive forgiveness,  
on a moment by moment basis.

No longer do we have to strive to find favour with God,  
for we already live in that favour,  
but we long to please the One who loves unconditionally.

May each of us know peace and joy in believing  
and live our lives in subjection to him.

Amen